The Way She Won Him

Mrs. Houstoun

Author of

"Recommended to Mercy"

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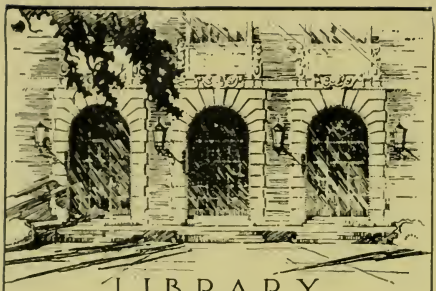

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THE WAY SHE WON HIM.

THE WAY SHE WON HIM.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS HOUSTOUN,

AUTHOR OF

"RECOMMENDED TO MERCY," "BARBARA'S WARNING,"
"SINK OR SWIM," "A HEART ON FIRE,"
ETC., ETC.

"On her *soul*, the fire had no power, nor was an hair of *her* head singed, nor had the smell of fire passed on *her*."—DANIEL IV. 27.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE WAY SHE WON HIM.

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THE WAY SHE WON HIM.

CHAPTER I.

WHO WAS ETTIE?

"But why is it impossible? You have not said one single word that shows me you are right, and I am so sure, so certain, dear Jennie, that it is my duty to earn a living if I can, by my voice, that you must not be angry with me if I do my best to try."

The speaker is a girl in the spring-time of her life; a bud of beauteous promise is she, with sweet, innocent blue

eyes, and a complexion on which even eight years of London air and smoke have been unable to make injurious inroads. Her companion is her elder by several years, and, with the exception of a kindly, sympathetic countenance, possesses but scant personal attractions. Both girls are hard at work, their occupation being that of shirt-making, and so busy are their fingers that, interesting to themselves as is the subject of their conversation, their eyes are never for a moment lifted from the coarse, rough work on which they are ceaselessly engaged. Their earnings are but small, for the labour market is overstocked, and that curse of the poor, the *middleman*, has, as usual, been at his unchristian work, and driven a hard bargain with the helpless ones.

The room in which the girls are sitting

is of tolerable size, but miserably bare of furniture, and is lighted by one small window—open now, for the weather is hot—which has view upon a dirty, noisy court. Terribly out of repair is the roof of the garret chamber, whilst from it there is suspended a curtain which, reaching as it does to the carpetless floor, shuts off about a third of the room from the portion thereof in which the toilers are at work. Within that curtain, and on a hard and narrow bed, there lies, stricken with an incurable malady, a woman who, during two long years, has patiently awaited her release from suffering. She is a widow, and the mother of the girl Jennie, who is her only child, for Henrietta, or Ettie, as she is usually called, has upon the sick woman no claim of kindred.

Until the last six months, she and her small family had led a contented country

life, and it was only of late that they had—

> "Known the woes of want,
> And the walk that costs a meal."

The husband of Mrs Shellwood—for that was the now widowed woman's name—had been bailiff to a wealthy squire in the west of England; the pay he received was liberal, and he, with his belongings, lived rent free, in a comfortable cottage on the estate. A better and more considerate landlord than Sir Geoffrey Fairholme, of Yeldham Hall, did not exist; nor was there a happier or a more contented woman in the whole country-side than Dame Shellwood as she busied herself in her little garden, milked her cow, and gave her earliest lessons to little Jennie, who was the pride, as well as the darling of her heart.

On one eventful summer's evening, when the child's nightly prayer of "God bless

father and mother, and make me a good child," had just been offered up, and the little one was about to be placed in its snug, well-curtained crib, the Rector of the parish surprised Mrs Shellwood by a visit. Mr Thornton was an old man, and had been for more than thirty years the Incumbent of Yeldham. His respect for the farm bailiff's wife was great—so great, that he was now about, not only to confide a secret to her keeping, but to—as he in his courteous fashion said—ask a favour at her hands.

"Anything as I can do to please your reverence shall be done, and willing," replied the comely matron, as she drew a chair forward for her visitor's use, and at his request seated herself near enough for her replies—he having become somewhat hard of hearing—to reach his ears; and then Mr Thornton, not without a certain

amount of hesitation and backwardness of speech, made known the subject of his mission.

"A lady—an old friend of mine," he said, "is desirous of placing in your hands an infant, a little girl, who requires a mother's care." (Here the good man took off his spectacles, and displayed unusual care in the cleansing of their already well brightened glasses.) "She will sign a paper, promising to give you a pound a week for the maintenance of the infant, but, as she is a—a well-born child, the lady hopes that you will, if you consent to take it, keep it from mixing with those who—"

"Might teach it bad words, your reverence; is that what you mean?" put in Mrs Shellwood hotly. "She'll learn none worse language, bless her, if she comes to me, than my own child would, and that is,

if I may make bold to say so, none at all."

"I am sure of that," said the Rector soothingly, "and it is because I know you to be a good and conscientious woman that I have asked you to take charge of this child. It was christened by the name of Henrietta—"

"And its other name, if I may make bold to ask?"

"I cannot tell you," answered the Rector, as a faint flush rose to his aged face; "but if you agree to the lady's proposals, I think it would be better to call the infant by your own name."

Mrs Shellwood, in addition to being naturally fond of children, was by no means blind to the excellence of the bargain which had been proposed to her, and therefore, subject to Mr Shellwood's approval, the affair was soon brought to

a conclusion. The bailiff's wife, although not an especially observant woman, had perceived from the first, a certain shrinking, on the Rector's side, from the part which he had undertaken, and in this idea she was confirmed when, towards the end of the interview, he took a small but massive gold ring, in the centre of which was a single torquoise, from his pocket, and said, in a confused and awkward manner, as he held it towards her,—

"I must ask you, Mrs Shellwood, to keep your possession of this ring a secret for a time, circumstances, however, will be your guide as to that matter; I have thought it my duty to place the ring in your hands, the lady for whom I act being ignorant of my doing so."

It is unnecessary to dwell at length on this early episode in little Ettie's career.

During nine years she led the happiest existence possible in Mrs Shellwood's cottage, but at that period not only did the twenty shillings weekly, which had been hitherto punctually paid, suddenly fail, but a yet stranger and a far sadder event occurred in the farm bailiff's household. After thirty years of honest, blameless life, Sir Geoffrey's trusted servant was discovered to have wronged his employer by falsifying his accounts! The fact of his disgrace fell like a thunderbolt on the guiltless ones, who were in utter ignorance of the truth that, of late, John Shellwood had become in more ways than one, a gambler and an ill-doer. Unable to face the neighbours, now that obloquy had befallen those she loved better than herself, Mrs Shellwood consented to a "moonlight flitting," and, in mystery and shame, the little family, reduced well nigh to

poverty, added yet four more to the toiling millions who, in the richest and most over-populated city in the world, hide from their fellow-sufferers their humbled heads.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY.

The ex-bailiff did not long survive the degradation and misery which his misconduct had entailed upon himself and his belongings. A weak rather than a wicked man, he, after many ineffectual attempts to obtain remunerative labour, had fretted himself into an attack of jaundice, which in a few weeks proved fatal. Then the widow, who had done brave battle against adverse Fate, fell sick in her turn, and, less fortunate than had been the deeply-repentant sinner, death had not come to her release. The relentless demon of chronic rheumatism held her in his iron clutch, and, whilst still a comparatively

young woman, she found herself doomed to be a life-long burden on, instead of a fellow-worker with, her children. With fingers crippled and distorted, even shirt-making was for her an impossibility, and many and bitter were the tears which over her helplessness she shed.

Dear to the invalid as her own child was, the beautiful young girl whose future fate, little as was the sick woman's experience of life, filled her with sad forebodings. Ettie's eager wish to utilise her voice by becoming a public singer was well-known to Mrs Shellwood, and the whispered dialogue between the two girls, as they plied their busy needles, had, she was well convinced, for its subject the pleading arguments of Ettie in favour of her cherished project. Nor was the sufferer mistaken, as the following conversation will prove, in her conjecture.

"I do not know what you and mother mean when you talk of danger in a music-hall," Ettie was saying. "If a girl means to be good, she *can* be good. Besides, I cannot believe that every man one sees is wicked. Mr Hutchins used to say that I had a fortune in my throat, and he would have told me, the good old man, if there was danger, as you say there is, in my trying to make money by it."

Now worthy Mr Hutchins, the organist at Yeldham Church, who had given gratis to Ettie, useful lessons in music, was scarcely more experienced, as regarded the perils which in a professional London career beset a lovely and impecunious young girl, than was Jennie Shellwood herself. He felt proud of the voice — a rich, powerful soprano—on which he had bestowed some elementary training, and saw only a docile, intelligent child in the girl whom, with the

best intentions, he was placing in the path of the destroyer; and Ettie's gratitude to her kind instructor caused her, when Jennie spoke of him as a dullish old man, entirely ignorant of the world and its ways, to take up the cudgels in his behalf.

"Surely, dear," she said, "Mr Hutchins, who must have been seventy years old, at least, and had always lived among musicians and singers, would hardly help knowing something about them; and then only think, dear Jennie, of the money I might, at a music-hall, be earning! Pounds on pounds after a little bit; and then," clapping her small hands joyously, "mother should have a tiny cottage just outside of London, with a pretty garden to sit out in on summer evenings, and she would get well again, and we should all three be happy once more together."

"Hush, dear, hush! do not let mother

hear what you are saying," whispered Jennie, for although they were seated at the far end of the big bare room, the curtained off portion of it was inconveniently near the lowered voices of the workwomen. "I will talk to mother to-morrow quietly, when you are away with the shirts, for I have an idea in my head that if you asked a magistrate he might help you to find out who your own people are. They may be rich, and thinking, perhaps, all this time that you are dead, have left off sending money as they once did. If Mrs Curtis will see to mother when we are away, you and I might go to-morrow to the Wells Street Police Court, and ask Mr Lynn if there is anything that we can do; at least, dear Ettie, give up thinking of the music-halls till we try what else there is which can be done."

It was only since misfortune had overtaken them that the subject of Ettie's real parentage had become one of importance, as well as of frequent discussion, in the Shellwood household. To the girl herself, all allusion to it was inexpressibly painful, for she not only hated to be reminded that the generous, tender-hearted woman who had watched over her infancy was not her real mother, but the sense of having been for years a burden and an incumbrance to the farm bailiff weighed heavily on her mind. It was this last consideration alone which caused Ettie to agree to her friend's suggestion, for, notwithstanding all that Jennie could say in its dispraise, the notion of gaining her own living by her voice seemed to the wilful girl far preferable to that of finding herself the child of parents who could so heartlessly desert their offspring.

It was very seldom that the two girls could spare an hour from their work for the purpose of outdoor exercise, and, alas! they had been enabled to retain amongst their habiliments but few of those which, in their more prosperous days, they had called their own. Such as remained, however, were neat and well cared for, and there was an air of decent respectability about the applicants which (added to Ettie's striking beauty) procured for them easy access to the magistrate's presence. After listening attentively to Jennie's modestly told story, Mr Lynn asked with evident interest sundry questions concerning the clergyman of their parish who had been the original cause of Mrs Shellwood's adoption of the infant.

"Surely," remarked the magistrate, "he could, if he were willing to do so, give you the information you require. Have

you applied to him for assistance in this matter?"

To this query Jennie replied in the negative.

"We have been unable to do so, sir," she said. "Mr Thornton is a very old gentleman, and, having become almost childish, has long since resigned his Living, and gone away from Yeldham. My mother has written more than once to the Rectory, but the letters have always been returned unanswered."

"And have you no other clue—I mean, do you know no other person who could possibly help you to learn the truth? If you do not, I cannot see my way," continued the magistrate, "to assisting you. You might try advertising, but that is expensive, and would probably lead to nothing. If, however, you care to do so, I shall be glad to assist you with a trifle"—and he was put-

ting his hand in his pocket, when Ettie, who had hitherto remained silent, said hastily, but in a voice which struck the magistrate as singularly soft and musical,—

"Thank you very much, sir, for your advice, but we are not in want. Come, Jennie, we have troubled the gentleman quite enough," and before a word could be said to stop them, the disappointed visitors had dropped two simple, old-fashioned curtseys, and had left the crowded, noisy building far behind them.

They walked home through the busy streets quickly and in silence, but notwithstanding the unaffectedly demure looks of both girls, a well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking man, attracted as much by Ettie's angry blushes as by her exceeding fairness, followed closely on their footsteps. It was in vain that they endeavoured, by such simple devices as dodging down a side street

and stopping for a few minutes before a shop window, to elude their follower's pursuit. He was too evidently an adept at the game to be easily circumvented, so that when the girls arrived, flushed and breathless, at their humble home, their persecutor was within a dozen yards of its entrance door.

"There!" panted Jennie, as they toiled up the steep and dangerously out-of-repair stairs. "Now you see the sort of thing to which, only a thousand times worse, you will be liable, if you persist, dear, in your plan. Oh, Ettie, child, be warned in time, and keep out of the way of temptation."

Ettie's answer was a merry laugh, as, standing for a moment on the little landing outside their ill-fitting door, she said,—

"Don't be afraid, you dear old fussy thing. See!" glancing from out the garret staircase window, "he is there still, and

much good may it do him. Really, dear Jennie, you must think me a poor creature. If I did not feel able to hold my own against *that* sort of temptation," and her short upper lip curled with scorn as she spoke, "I would stick to shirtmaking all the days of my life."

CHAPTER III.

A FIRST STEP GAINED.

Mrs Curtis, the friend in need who, on special occasions, "looked," as Jennie phrased it, after the helpless widow, was a fellow lodger, who, like the Shellwoods, had seen better days. She was a cheerful, active body, a widow also, with an only son who was at once the pride and torment of her life; for Jem Curtis was not only the breadwinner-in-chief of her small home, but had been, in her opinion, so highly gifted by nature that every girl of her acquaintance would, as a matter of course, endeavour to draw him into her toils.

Jem was a compositor by trade, and, being intelligent and well instructed, was

in the receipt of good wages; to set, however, against these advantages, he was decidedly deficient in good looks, and a desperate but hopeless love which he cherished for Ettie Shellwood rendered him shy and awkward when in her presence. It was only after Mrs Curtis had, as she phrased it, spoken her mind to Ettie on the subject which was next her heart, that she became intimate with the neighbours in whose sorry plight she, nevertheless, deeply sympathised. The sight of Ettie's bright, saucy beauty filled her maternal breast with fears on Jem's account, and, although there was something in the young girl's manner which rather discouraged familiarity, she ventured one day, when the object of Jem's adoration had called to ask her the loan of a little firewood, to give the damsel a piece of advice.

"You'll always find me willing to oblige,

Miss Ettie," she said; "but I expect from neighbours as much as I give, and if you think that my Jem is to be caught, by your pretty face and your coming here after him, into making a fool of himself, you and I shall fall out."

The ripple of musical laughter which broke from Ettie's lips as she listened to this warning by no means disconcerted the widow; but when the young girl, having recovered from her attack of hilarity, proceeded to imitate her companion's frankness of speech, the face of the latter clouded over with displeasure.

"Your Mr Jim," she said, "is, after all, cleverer than I should have thought him. Why, he has asked me three whole times to marry him, and you suspected nothing all the while," tapping her small forefinger, as she spoke, thrice emphatically on her left-hand palm; "and he has promised

me a nice little house to live in, and all sorts of good things besides; but I said No, No, No, I would rather stay at home and keep to button sewing on, for ever."

However much Mrs Curtis's maternal vanity might have been wounded by this honest revelation of facts, she, being a sensible and far-seeing woman, kept her feelings to herself. She perceived that Ettie was thoroughly in earnest, and that her precious son might safely be trusted within reach of the penniless girl's attractions, and in the end, partly in gratitude for the part that Ettie had played, but also in a great measure from genuine kindness of heart, it became her habit to perform for her poorer neighbours many an act of goodwill and friendship.

Amongst other useful deeds was that of sanctioning the protection of Jem's chaperonage for the object of his admira-

tion on an all-important occasion, when she, determined at last on having her own way, set off, arrayed in her best, and looking her prettiest, to interview the manager of a popular music-hall, whose splendid-looking establishment stood at no great distance from her humble home. Mr Curtis, when dressed in his Sunday clothes, was not altogether without an air and manner which might, by the undecerning, be mistaken for that of a so-called gentleman, and therefore Ettie, who, stout of heart as she endeavoured to appear, felt her courage slightly failing her, was not ungrateful of the attendance by her side of a tall, respectable-looking male companion. Jim, for his part, dared not allude to his ardent wish that his companion would be unsuccessful in her mission, and when, *she* having obtained without difficulty, admission to the manager's room,

he, being shut out from that sanctuary, experienced a terrible foreboding that the girl, having entered the *hell*, as he considered it, of that dreadful place, was—like the Eurydice of whose sad fortunes he had read—lost to him forever.

Meanwhile, Ettie, with recovered *sang-froid*, was enduring without a change of countenance the look of undisguised admiration with which Mr Fulford, the astute manager of the music-hall, was regarding her. He was a man of middle-age, stout, with a grizzled, well-shaped head, and bold, determined eyes. As he gazed, the sight of the girl's exquisite face caused him to perceive inwardly that, provided she had a voice, together with talent and stage witchery, he would be unwise to let her slip through his fingers.

"You can sing, I suppose Miss—pardon me, I did not catch your name."

"Ettie Cranston," answered the girl, who had already provided herself with an alias. "Yes—I have learnt—I have taken lessons —that is—in music."

"Good; but a comic song now, a lively little thing, with 'go' in it; did you ever try your hand at that?"

"No, but it does not sound difficult—you mean, perhaps, that I should have to act?"

"Perhaps so, later on—but now, let me hear your voice. Can you sing any little thing from memory? No occasion to be shy, my dear; I'm an old married man, and you're too pretty not to get listened to, whatever voice you may have."

Ettie was far too fully occupied with the conviction that the present was a crisis in her lot for any feelings of indignation at the manager's freedom of speech to find a place in her heart; her courage mounted

with the necessity for its exercise, and as she had fortunately caught both the words and air of a comic song which, a few months previously, she had heard sung by a street performer, she now, without a moment's hesitation, and with the airy grace of a bird upon the bough, poured forth the joyous melody into Mr Fulford's astonished ears. That enterprising individual was fairly taken aback by what he heard and saw. The girl looked so young, and fair, and delicate, that the rich volume of sound which poured from her fresh lips took him almost as much by surprise as might the thunder of a ten-pounder from the muzzle of a pocket pistol; nevertheless, he strove, and imagined also that he had succeeded in his endeavour, to hide the impression he had received. Ettie, however, was not to be imposed upon. She saw through the "damnation of faint praise" with which

her performance was received, and felt certain that she had achieved a triumph. Fortunately for her, the "young lady" whose lot it had been to win, by her singing of that especial song, the plaudits of the audience, had been obliged, through illness, to abandon for a time the scene of her triumphs. The serio-comic interlude had had a short but successful run, and was only left out of the programme by reason of the difficulty of providing a fitting substitute for the songstress in question. In Miss Cranston, the manager was quick to discover all the qualifications necessary for the vacant post. She possessed beauty —*verve*, and, above all, a voice of sufficient power to fill every corner of the big Hall, which was generally crowded to overflowing; and, therefore, Mr Fulford decided upon saying, in his blandest manner,—

"You have a powerful voice, Miss Cran-

ston, and with a little practice you might take a tolerably good part. 'My Jolly Pal' suits your voice—ahem—and style. It is a good imitation, in short, of Miss de Montmorency's manner, so that I would be willing to pay you thirty shillings a week, which is, you understand, five shillings a song for 'My Jolly Pal,' which you will sing nightly. Does that suit you? You will be hard to please, my dear, I can tell you, if it does not."

Ettie, young and ignorant of worldly matters although she was, could see at once that the manager was taking unfair advantage of her inexperience, but the fact of being engaged at all was so overwhelmingly delightful, that the idea of making a fight against injustice never even occurred to her. The offer of the far-seeing manager was accepted with thanks, and Ettie, treading, as it seemed, on air, left the business

room of the "Coventry" with a pretty flush of triumph on her cheeks, and eyes to which the consciousness of success had given added brightness. Jem Curtis, who was walking disconsolately to and fro before the gorgeous building, saw at once that his worst fears were realised; nor was it necessary for Ettie, when she came with her light, half-dancing step towards him, to express in words her delight at what had taken place.

"He has engaged me!" she cried breathlessly, as, wholly unconscious that the act she spoke of set the compositor's blood beating at fever heat, she took his unoffered arm. "I am to begin on Monday, and for singing only one song, besides choruses and that kind of thing, I am to have thirty shillings a week! Jennie will be glad now, when she sees how comfortable I can make mother, and save her own poor eyes from wearing themselves out."

And so she prattled on, whilst her companion, wrapped in moody silence, brooded bitterly over the thoughts that the girl he loved was ruined body and soul for ever.

CHAPTER IV.

SOLD INTO BONDAGE.

On the strength of her written agreement with the manager of the "Coventry," Ettie was enabled to purchase, on credit, the materials not only for a cheap and *fetching* evening dress, but, from a neighbouring butcher, as many pounds of meat as would help, by being manufactured into beef tea, to strengthen and invigorate the invalid behind the curtain.

"Now, Jennie dear," said the happy girl, as she and her fellow needlewoman busied themselves over a cloud-like heap of flimsiness, blue of tint, which was being fashioned into a dress for the *debutante*, "you are glad now, are not you? And you will not fret

any more, or let mother fret over all the horrid things which you think may happen to me. See how easy thirty shillings are earned—"

"Yes, dear, and how easily spent," put in Jennie sadly. "Why, when this dress, and the real camellia for your hair, and the butcher's bill, and the air cushion for mother are paid for, you will have nothing left of your thirty shillings, and what will you do then?"

"Oh!" the thoughtlessly happy child explained, "I shall make that shabby old manager raise my pay. Take care, dear, not to cut the breadths too short. We have no money for smart shoes yet, so I must keep my feet well out of sight. Oh," she continued excitedly, "think what joy it will be to get mother into a real nice bedroom, such as she had at Yeldham, and to save your poor dear eyes

from toiling over the horrid shirts, and it will be my doing—mine, mine, mine!" she added, as she fitted across her girlish bust, lovely in its budding beauty, a portion of the gossamer fabric of which her dress was to be fashioned. "The greedy old man! as if I could not see what he really thought of my voice, and how he would hate my offering my services to the Cambridge, which I shall do if he does not come to sense."

"But, Ettie, you should bear in mind," said Jennie, "that this is only a piece of luck. You know but only one song; Miss Montmorency may soon be able to sing again, and—"

"Well, in the meantime, I am to join in the chorus, and I shall soon pick up fresh songs, besides dances. For I *can* dance, you must own that, you dear old Jennie. Oh, when I think of that servants'

ball at Sir Geoffrey's, when I had so many partners, I feel that to dance again like that would set me wild with joy."

The name of Miss Ettie Cranston was duly printed on the bills of the "Coventry" entertainments, and care having been taken by the manager and his staff that the beauty and accomplishments of the new singer should not remain hidden under a bushel; it was, therefore, before an especially crowded and highly expectant audience that Ettie was called upon to appear. The first glimpse which she caught of the sea of faces that were raised towards the platform on which she stood, caused her heart to sink within her; but nature had gifted her with strong nerves, and a certain amount of inherent pride supported her through the first agitating moments of her *entrée*. But it was to the reception which her beauty gained her that her triumph

over natural shyness was due, for loud and long were the plaudits which greeted her ears, and before she had given utterance to a note, flowers from the buttonholes of the smoking audience were freely showered on the stage. This encouragement, together with the pleasant certainty on her own part that her dress became her well, were effectual in procuring for the new singer a genuine ovation. "My Jolly Pal," a not especially refined street ballad, produced, when issuing from the fresh, pure lips of the new performer, such a *furore* of spontaneous enthusiasm that, from that hour, it became clear to the experienced in such matters, that "Miss Cranston" was destined to become a popular favourite, and therefore, the manager, with a keen eye to his own interest, decided on investing a certain amount of capital on the musical education of his *trouvaille.* Ettie

was, however, bound by agreement to, for the space of three years, consider herself as his thrall, or chattel. In the meantime, the payment for her services would be raised to three pounds a week. With that sum at her disposal, she was able to carry out some of the plans which, for the good of her benefactors, she had formed. The project of removing Mrs Shellwood, even to a semi-country cottage, had perforce to be abandoned, for Ettie found it necessary to remain in the immediate neighbourhood of her work; and moreover, as Jennie invariably escorted her both to and from the Music Hall, her wishes and conveniences became matters of importance.

Miss Shellwood and her mother were duly installed in a comfortably-furnished small house near the Fulham Road, and thither Ettie, protected by her staid companion, nightly returned in the omnibus which at

a late hour passed the gilded walls of the "Coventry." Jennie, who was not without a spirit of independence, and even pride, took in dressmaking, for, as she often told herself, Ettie might not always be their staff and stay. "The child was still so young, and, alas! the danger of falling was, in her case, so great."

Kind-hearted Mrs Curtis continued her neighbourly visits to her old friends, whilst Jem appeared to find some consolation for his hopeless love in talking over with Jennie the success of his idol, as well as the perils by which she was surrounded.

"I declare, Miss Shellwood," he said one evening to his kind auditress, whilst Ettie was delighting a crowded audience at the "Coventry," and he had found himself able to snatch a few minutes from his work, in order to worship from afar the cruel object of his infatuation, "it drives

me off my head to see the crowd of fellows who stand before the shop windows, where they can see her photo. And then the remarks they make! One praises her white shoulders, and another her little feet, till I long, so I do, to punch *their* heads for them, and teach 'em what good manners are."

"Poor child!" responded Jennie kindly, "she gets enough made of to turn a stronger head than hers, but, thank God, she has kept straight as yet. In another year she'll be out of what she calls her *time*, and then—ah, well, Mr Curtis, we must hope the best. She's laughed at lovers as yet, which makes them, I think, all the more mad about her, but if ever Ettie does come to care for anyone—"

"But she doesn't, does she?" broke in Jem hotly. "She hasn't told you, has she, that there is any one who has dared to make her care for him?"

"Why, there have been many, as you know," laughed Jennie, "who have dared to try, but she manages somehow to make them keep their distance; but she's little more than a child yet, and, as I said before, one can but hope the best."

CHAPTER V.

A LATE FIRST LOVE.

As the time drew near when Ettie would become a free agent, and at liberty to make, if she should so choose, better terms for herself than she had hitherto been able to achieve with Mr Fulford, two men, who were destined to act prominent parts in her life's future, commenced playing the respective *rôles* for which Fate had marked them out. One of these, who was the elder by some twenty years of the other, had nearly reached his five-and-fortieth birthday, but he looked younger than his age, and was tall, good-looking, and gifted, moreover, with a striking and well-bred air. His name was Vavasour, and he had made a large fortune through successful opera-

tions in South America. A clear-headed, sensible man, the only foolish act of whose life was his early marriage to a woman of whose antecedents he knew but little, but whose beauty and somewhat daring imitation of Bohemian life had captivated his boyish fancy.

It was during one of his periodical absences from the Argentine Republic that Hugh Vavasour had fallen madly in love with Ettie Cranston. His wife had long since succeeded in disgusting him with the domestic life for which, in fact, Nature had not especially fitted him, and now, the feelings which the young Music Hall singer had excited in his breast differed so widely from any which he had once felt for the wife—so-called—of his bosom, that, if he were, which was never the case, to give a thought to the subject, he might with truth deny the soft impeachment of ever having

(even in her best days) been in love with handsome, "fast" Dorothy Fairholme. Between the ages of himself and his wife there existed, in reality, scarcely any difference, but whereas not even expensive toilettes and careful makings-up of her fretful face could cause Mrs Vavasour to look otherwise than a middle-aged woman, her husband, with his careless ease of manner, his disregard of his own personal appearance, and a certain *bonhommie* by which, when in society, he was distinguished, might, and indeed did, still pass current in the world in which he lived as being *almost* a young man. He was not a dissipated character, nor had it ever been his habit to vary the sober routine of married existence by the *laisser aller* of demi-monde society, or the attractions which to younger men, the theatres, legitimate or otherwise, are apt to prove so perilously captivating. It was the

sight of Ettie's photograph in a shop window which, in the first instance, induced him to enter the walls of the "Coventry," and after that first step, some hours of every evening which he could call his own, were passed in that, to him, novel place of resort, yclept a Music Hall.

When a man of Hugh Vavasour's age first discovers the depth and strength of his own passions, the chances are that he becomes their slave, and such was in truth the case with the man who, hitherto absorbed in the excitement of money-making, fell to worshipping, far more madly than might a youth in his teens, the saucy, *debonnair* young beauty, of whose invulnerability to attacks, made either upon her vanity or her heart, he soon obtained convincing proof. Not in his own person did he make this early discovery; he was far too shrewd an observer of human nature to risk certain

defeat by a premature avowal of his passion—his object was to obtain by degrees the influence over her which his position, age, and experience were well calculated to gain, and to effect this object he left no means untried. And, to speak frankly, the chances of success were in his favour. He was the first real gentleman who, with the courtesy of his class and the tact of a man of the world, had approached her with the deference which, from one so much her superior in age, was a flattery in itself. In the caressing softness of his manner, there was much to charm, and nothing to arouse the suspicions of so inexperienced a girl as Ettie, that more was meant than met the ear; and thence it followed that she took pride as well as pleasure in attentions which were not long in becoming too marked to escape the notice of the "Coventry Hall" frequenters. Mr Vavasour's success as an

aspirant for Miss Cranston's favour was freely commented on. It was, of course, a mere question of time, for he was known to be a wealthy man, and when—so said the scandalmongers—was there ever a girl in Ettie Cranston's position who could be proof against such temptations as Mr Vavasour could hold out?

It is in the month of July. Ettie's term of servitude is within a month of expiring, and she has nearly reached her twentieth year. Several weeks had elapsed since Hugh Vavasour commenced his quiet, stealthy siege, and the girl has grown accustomed to his half-fatherly talk, and speaks to him openly as to a friend. He is standing with her now, near the doorway leading to the platform, and from his six feet two of height is looking down with eyes of passionate admiration on the seated figure by his side. She is waiting

her turn for the performance of a comic song, in which the joyous laughter which has had so large a share in securing her popularity is, at the close of every verse, introduced. Mr Vavasour, in allusion to the hilarous burst that is expected of her, is saying,—

"Can you feel always sure that it will always be forthcoming? It *sounds* spontaneous, but are you never conscious of not being in the mood to sing as blithely as a lark in the sky, and to laugh as if you had not a care in the world?"

"Never," she answers, "and the reason is, I suppose, because I have no cares. I am a very happy girl, Mr Vavasour, and if you knew what my voice has done for me, you would not wonder at my being grateful to it, and feeling quite ready to laugh for the amusement of an easily entertained public."

"But you must be so tired of doing the same thing night after night, to all those cads who fill the house with smoke, and are, at any moment, ready to get up a row if you should be unable or unwilling to come forward for their pleasure."

"Well," laughs Ettie, "I have hitherto, I must say, found them very good-natured 'cads'; and indeed, if you could realise the sort of life that my voice has saved me from, you would not wonder at my generally feeling far more ready to laugh than to cry."

"Was it such a hard life then, poor child?" he says compassionately, whilst the expression of his deep-set eyes would have warned a woman less ignorant than was Ettie of the volcanic nature of the human heart, that there was danger in the air. "Tell me about it. Or stay—shall I make a guess? Dressmaking, during eigh-

teen hours of the twenty-four, for some Madame Josephine, or other, who had no more heart than a stone, and who would not care a rap if you were found dead in your bed for want of sufficient air to breathe?"

"Wrong," says the girl, with a pretty smile, and a shake of her fair, flower-crowned head. "I was nothing higher in the social scale than a stitcher of coarse shirts for what are called the slop shops, and oh! what hard work it was, and how badly we were paid! I have often wondered since whether you, and such as you have any idea of what poor people suffer. We were nearly starving, my sister and mother and I, but they tried hard, poor dears, to keep me at home, because— Well, because it was so difficult, they said, for a girl in a Music Hall to keep straight."

"And," says Vavasour, in his low, caressing tones, and smoothing, as he speaks, with

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his well-bred-looking, ungloved hand the long, light-brown moustache which shades his upper lip, "you have been proud, have you not, to show them how wrong they were? Your sister—Jennie, I think you call her—has left off looking daggers at me as she used to do."

"Ah," laughs Ettie, "that is since she knew that you are a married man, and only say nice things to me. Before that, she used to scold me dreadfully about you, and even now she thinks it naughty of you, with a wife and daughters of your own, to come to such a place as this."

"With no Jennie to look after me, eh? But tell me, how come you and your sister to know so much about my private history? And when did *you* learn that I am so rich in domestic blessings?"

"Oh, weeks ago. Just as if you could help it's being known! But I was sorry

when I was told, although I cannot say exactly why, you seemed to be, in some odd sort of way, less my friend. You have *them* to think about so much, you know, and that must make a difference in what one feels, and talks about."

Vavasour is silent for a moment or two, whilst Ettie, wholly unconscious of the tumult of feeling which her carelessly spoken words have excited in her companion's breast, busies herself in more securely fastening the wreath of natural flowers which adorn her dress. He is on some accounts glad that Ettie has become aware of the ties that bind him to another. His path regarding her is, he feels, in some sort cleared before him, and it is at any rate apparent that the girl's interest in, and liking for him, has not been lessened by the fact that he is a married man. It is, therefore, with

but little effort to speak calmly that he says,—

"So you did not quite give me up as a friend when you heard that I could not hope to be more to you than your adviser, your protector—a second Jennie, in short," and having so said, he, with a rather bitter laugh, adds, "There is not one of the insolent young fellows whom you keep at bay by laughing at them, who has not more to offer you than I have. Ah—Well, my child, I must be satisfied to play the part of friend, and help to keep those impudent mashers at a distance."

"Oh, that will not give you much trouble," the girl retorts, "for I don't care one bit for any one of them. I almost wish I did," she adds, a little sadly. "It must be nice to be loved, I suppose, but then I might be jealous, or *he* might, so things are best with me as they are."

The young girl had just arrived at this decision, when the summons came for her appearance on the platform, and, with a bright little nod to Vavasour, who strolled away to find an empty seat amongst the audience, she advanced with a graceful bound towards the footlights.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS VAVASOUR KEEPS AWAKE.

It was late that night when Hugh Vavasour returned to the large, furnished house in South Kensington, in which the London season had been passed by his belongings. He had himself taken but a small part in the gaieties which the introduction into society of his eldest daughter entailed, and the constant pleas of having business to transact which Mrs Vavasour's reproaches for his frequent absences called forth, were far from convincing that keen-sighted lady that "Hugh's" conduct as a husband was beyond reproach.

Mrs Vavasour, when at home, kept early hours. She was a good-looking woman still, and set due value on the "beauty sleep" which, on invitation nights, she was forced to forego, and, consequently, when Mr Vavasour, having let himself in with his latch-key, found his wife wide awake, and seated in the drawing-room on her favourite couch, he felt forebodings of a coming storm. Nor was he mistaken; scarcely had the door closed behind him when Mrs Vavasour, putting on one side the book which she had made a pretence of reading, commenced the expected attack.

"I really think," she said, "that you might, for one evening at least, give up the delights of your club, or wherever it is that you resort to for amusement. You could have had your rubber here, for General Williams and his brother sent

over from the opposite side of the Square to say how glad they would be to look in, and as you had told me that you were only going to smoke a cigar outside, my answer of course was that we should be glad to see them. They must have thought your absence most extraordinary, and I shall be glad to know what excuse I can make to them for you?"

Now, before he had fallen under the spells of Ettie's bright attractions, Hugh Vavasour, who, to save his soul alive would not have lied (save for a woman's sake) to his fellow-men, found—his questioner being only a wife—a falsehood *quite convanient*, as the Irish say, to his tongue. He had suddenly remembered, he said—so stupid of him to forget—that Fred Sylvester expected him at the club, about one of the horses which must be sold.

"You see," he continued more boldly,

now that the ice was fairly broken, and the attention of his Dorothea seemed awakened to the reasonableness of his case, "that the horses must be sold before we start. There is a good deal to do and to think about, as you must be aware."

"Exactly," interrupted Mrs Vavasour stiffly, and the shrug of her well-shaped shoulders spoke volumes of incredulity as she went on to say, "*à propos* of that horrid voyage, *I* should be glad too of more opportunities of consulting you—"

"But, my dear Dorothy," Hugh broke in hastily, "if you dislike going out to Rio so much, why do not you stay a little longer in England? Now that Ella has been presented, and she and you are fairly in the swim, it would surely be better for both the girls if

you were to remain, say at Cowes, or any other pleasant place, till London fills again. I should miss you terribly, of course, but as I make nothing of the run backwards and forwards, and as it would be for the advantage of the children, I must not think of self. You should hear what Lady Annandale says—she is very strong on the subject of a mother's chaperonage for girls; they never ought, she says, to throw away their chances. Now, there is Lord Sundridge, who certainly admires Ella, and I have never been able to understand, nor can Lady Annandale either, why you persistently keep him at a distance."

Mrs Vavasour had listened in angry silence to her husband's suggestion, but this second allusion to his elderly relative's opinions proved too much for endurance, and she exclaimed angrily,—

"Don't talk to me of Lady Annandale's advice. Look what a mess she has made of her own daughters! One is the wife of a briefless barrister, whilst she allows that handsome lad Charlie Alston to be always hanging about the house. If Lady Annandale talks to me as she seems to have done to you, I shall speak more openly to her than she will perhaps like. I know my duty as well as she does, and that part of that duty is to sacrifice my own tastes and wishes, and to follow my husband wherever *his* business or his pleasure calls him. As to Lord Sundridge, I, as Ella's mother, may be trusted to know what is best for her."

And having so said, Mrs Vavasour, who had effectually succeeded in making the contrast between her society and that of Ettie Cranston as marked as possible,

betook herself to her virtuous couch, leaving her husband to his reflections. The time had been—but that was previous to the eventful day when the sight of Ettie's photograph had "set his heart on fire"—when Hugh Vavasour, who was fond of his girls, and especially so of the sixteen-year old child Dolly, would have contemplated with dismay even a temporary privation of their society, but now, alas! for poor weak human nature, he breathed to himself, with quite a fever of longing, the wish that she would but make up her mind to let him sail *without* her, and *with*—for such was the natural corollary to the thought—the dangerously attractive beauty by whom his senses had been enthralled. His hopes of eventually persuading Ettie to, under his auspices and protection, undertake a voyage to Buenos Ayres, with the

intention of utilising her talents in that rich and pleasure-loving city, were, as yet, small, but it however, suddenly occurred to him that the fact of his being accompanied by his family might possibly tend to further his projects regarding Ettie. If he could only, in the event of the young girl's lending a favourable ear to his advice, keep from Dorothea the knowledge that their lovely professional fellow-passenger on board the *Princess Carmen* was a friend and *protégée* of his own, all might be well. But how, he asked himself, unless by taking Ettie into his confidence on the subject, could the much desired secrecy be maintained? Vavasour understood fully enough of the girl's nature to be aware that she would not easily be induced to play the underhand part which would be required of her. His only chance, he decided, would lie in

an appeal to her sympathy with the trials which an uncongenial marriage had entailed upon him. That he had made some progress in winning her affections he was well assured. She regarded him already as a true and reliable friend, and as such, she could not fail (supposing always that she and Mrs Vavasour were to come in contact) to perceive that the complaints whispered in her ears of that lady's unfitness to understand and appreciate *him* were the reverse of exaggerated. In any case, great caution would be required. There were more women even than the two principal actors in the play whom it would be necessary to hoodwink, for the young girls his daughters were quick of wit, and so many and complex were the difficulties which beset his path, that, but for the madness of his passion for Ettie, he would probably have

abandoned as totally impracticable the scheme which his teeming brain had hatched.

. . . . . .

I have said that, towards the close of Ettie's engagement at the "Coventry," *two* men, differing greatly in age, and, I may here add, in other important respects besides, made their *entrées* upon the stage of her young joyous life. One of these men was, as we already know, Hugh Vavasour, the experienced man of the world, whilst the younger was no other than the "handsome boy" Charlie Alston, of whom Mrs Vavasour had spoken when censuring Lady Annandale for her shortcomings as a chaperon.

The young fellow was truly, as she had suggested, *dangerously* handsome. Nature had either blessed or cursed him, as the case may be, with one of those faces the

charm of which few women are capable of resisting. His eyes were blue as an Italian sky, and his hair, of a light golden brown, waved over a forehead broad and fair as that of a young sun god. A total absence of personal vanity was a striking feature in Charlie Alston's idiosyncrasy, and, until the consequences of his own youthful follies called up at times a serious expression to his winning face, the smiles which disclosed his perfect teeth had already, boy albeit Mrs Vavasour had called him, worked wild havoc in more than one female breast. But, if the truth must be told, Charlie Alston could no longer plead his boyhood as an excuse for much of the mischief which, both as regarded himself and others, he had wrought. At twenty-two he had seen so much of the evil side of Life, that, but for his natural tenderness, and a certain reverence for women, which, through the

teaching of a good and tender mother, he had imbibed, he might have become a hardened cynic. The only remaining child of his parents—for Death had early thinned the olive branches which grew about their table—he had unfortunately met with injudicious treatment at his father's hands—for Colonel Alston's notions of parental discipline were of the strictest, and the idea of making a companion of his son, and of encouraging the lad to confide in him as a friend, was one which he would have treated with ridicule and contempt. Charlie passed, "by the skin of his teeth"—to quote his own words on the occasion—his examination for the Army, and the fact that so it was, angered the Colonel not a little, for the lad was clever, and, had he not idled away his time, might have been a cause to his family, of pride, instead of well-nigh proving, as the disappointed old soldier

said, a failure as regarded his future career.

Mrs Alston, who idolised her son, and who, by reason perhaps of that idolatry, was more keenly alive than was her husband to the dangers for one of her boy's temperament of a profession such as Colonel Alston had decided on for him, read with tearful eyes in the *Gazette*, Charlie's appointment, at the age of nineteen, to a commission in the Household Cavalry. Into the particulars of his career in that distinguished corps, it is not necessary to enter; it is sufficient to say that Colonel Alston's patience and pocket were, during that period, often severely tried, and this, although his mother, with a moral cowardice which Charlie had unhappily inherited, concealed from her husband many of his least pardonable shortcomings, and denied herself not a few of

the good things of life in order to send to her prodigal the wherewith to pay his most pressing debts. Her father, who was no other than the former Rector of Yeldham, had, until incapacitated by old age from fulfilling the duties of his calling, come generously forward in aid of the grandson who, despite his errors and extravagance, the old man dearly loved; and thus it fell about that, by the time that Charlie Alston had reached the age of twenty-two, he had so effectually exasperated the author of his being that the latter, in despair of seeing any signs of the prodigal's reformation, had begun to entertain serious thoughts of removing him from the regular army, and sending him forth to sow the remainder of his wild oats in the ranks of Colonel Carrington's South African Volunteers. By this it will be clear that the lad's fortunes must have been almost at their lowest ebb,

when an event occurred which, by bringing him in contact with the beauty of the "Coventry" Music Hall, worked a signal change in the future of Charlie Alston's life.

CHAPTER VII.

CHARLIE ALSTON SCORES ONE.

In London, when the "Season" is at its height, and carriages of all sorts and conditions are hurrying along the crowded thoroughfare, there is no crossing more fraught with danger than that which, close to Albert Gate, lies between Hyde Park and the great emporium of fashionable resort known to all the world of London as that of "Knells and Bartrops." It is a glorious afternoon in June, and H.R.H. the Prince of Wales has, on behalf of the Queen, been holding a Levee. The roadway is therefore more than usually crowded, when two young women, plainly but becomingly dressed, are waiting their oppor-

tunity to cross the broad street, that leads from the shop where they had been making their purchases, to the haven which the park would afford them. One of them, the younger of the two, a tall, fair girl, on whose bright face the spice of possibly existing danger has brought a roseate flush, has in her haste failed to perceive, as she ventures one small and perfectly *chaussée* foot upon the well-watered road, that a hansom cab, driven at a rather undue rate of speed, is within a few inches of her quickly-advancing figure. It was, as she was afterwards told, the "nearest thing in life" that she was not knocked down and probably killed, and she speedily became aware that her safety was entirely due to the presence of mind displayed by a young officer (the occupant of the cab), who, catching hold of the reins, threw by main force the horse upon his haunches, and then, springing from his seat,

showered a volume of abuse on the heedless driver of the vehicle.

The hero of this little adventure was no other than Charlie Alston, who, attired in his war paint, was returning from the levee to his quarters in the Knightsbridge Barracks. A crowd had at once collected round the spot where the unlucky cabby, having descended from his perch, was eagerly taking his bible oath to Policeman 21 G that he was not driving at a greater rate than six miles an hour, when his "fare" pulled up the "'oss, and began a-swearing at 'im like the dashed trooper" that he was. Charlie had not been the sole occupant of the hansom, and a whisper from his companion, a brother officer, having informed him that the beautiful girl whom he had rescued was Ettie Cranston of the "Coventry," he (Charlie) lost no time in following up an acquaintance thus auspiciously begun.

"I am afraid," he, with his charming smile, said to her, "that the fright has shaken you. Let me help you to cross. Here, policeman," he in the voice of one having authority added to Policeman 21 G, who, interrupted in his stereotyped duty of stopping carriages for the sake of the pedestrian public, stood looking vacantly on at the scene, "you stop the traffic for a minute, and send all these gaping fools to blazes, whilst I help these two ladies to cross the road."

His manner was so autocratic, and he looked, as Jennie afterwards said, "so grand," that Ettie could not refuse his offered arm as he steered her towards the opposite pavement. He was in truth a striking figure, and the observed of all observers, as, his breastplate and helmet glittering in the sun, and his polished jack-boots and snowy leathers fitting to

perfection his well-shaped legs, he stooped his tall head till his helmet's plume touched the girl's blushing cheek, and whispered, in his soft, well-bred accents,—

"I may come and see you, may not I? Are you every evening at your Music Hall?"

"Yes, every evening," she answered simply; "but I shall be very glad to see you there, and to thank you again for having helped us so kindly. This is my sister Jennie, who takes care of me," she, with her musical laugh, added, and the next moment her place by Charlie Alston's side was empty.

It may seem strange to some that this young Lothario, who was the pet and idol of not a few fair women, had never sought the acquaintance of an artiste so famed for her many fascinations as was Ettie Cranston; but the reason lay in the fact

that Charlie's tastes were in many respects fastidious, and that, having mentally associated a Music Hall beauty with a certain coarseness of speech and manner, he preferred the veneer of good manners and refinement which, amongst successful *demi-mondaines*, was to be found, to the underbred familarities which, in a Music Hall performer, it was, he imagined, only natural to expect.

Anything more at variance with the type of girls which Charlie's fancy *quoad* a "Coventry" hall singer had conjured up, than the reality as represented by Ettie Cranston, it would be hard to find, and his surprise found vent in words as he and his friend Lord Sundridge were driven at a soberer pace than before to their destination.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I should never, unless you had told me who she was,

have imagined that girl to be Ettie Cranston. Why, she looks thoroughbred to the tips of her fingers; and, by the powers, old chap, isn't she a stunner? The idea of such a glorious girl as that singing comic songs for the amusement of the roughs and cads of a Music Hall is simply disgusting, and, if I wasn't as stone broke as it's possible for a fellow to be, wouldn't I have a try—that's all—"

"To help her to earn her bread in another way, I conclude?" put in Sundridge, who was a thoroughly well-principled young fellow, and was not the least ashamed of the virtuous impulses by which he was often guided. "Well, dear boy," he added, as they left the cab, "under the circumstances, it is perhaps just as well for Miss Cranston that you are, as you say, at pretty near the end of your tether, and, for her

sake as well as for your own, I hope that you will leave the girl alone."

But this hope was not destined to be realised, for, before many weeks had elapsed, this child of many prayers had become a nightly visitor to the Hall, where his pursuit of the lovely girl who had made herself as well known for her *coldness* of disposition as for her various rare fascinations, was no secret to most of the Music Hall *habitués.*

To this rule Hugh Vavasour was an exception. Living as he did in a totally different set from that to which Charlie Alston belonged, and being, moreover, from his habitual air of proud reserve, a man whom it was morally impossible to "chaff," the young Life Guardsman had found no difficulty in keeping secret from Mr Vavasour his worship of the "Coventry" hall divinity. He was not known by

sight to the man who, like himself, seized on every possible opportunity of obtaining access to Ettie, and had it not been for the fact that the girl's fancy—if not, as yet, her heart—had been caught by the remarkable personal attractions of her new admirer, it is possible that he might never have obtained the influence which the circumstance which I have just related enabled him to gain over her. She spoke the truth when she told Hugh Vavasour that she had never loved, but she deceived him—and that to her own regret, for she was naturally truthful—when she concealed from her older friend the part she took in affording to Charlie Alston opportunities of conversing with her. Perhaps, too, it may be urged in her behalf that love had crept into her heart too stealthily for her to be aware of its approach.

Amongst the qualities and proclivities which, in Ettie's temperament, were worthy of notice, her extraordinary power of calling forth, by her own warm gift of sympathy, the confidence of others, must not be overlooked. It was in part the existence of this power that in a manner compelled Charlie Alston to pour forth into her pitying ear the story of his misused life.

"Never," he one evening said to her, "was there under Heaven such an ass as I have been; and if I had but the chances again which I have thrown away, how differently I should act."

"You must tell me some time what your troubles are," responded Ettie kindly; and then, she, with a wisdom beyond her years, added, "people are seldom allowed a second chance. Still, I suppose it is not always entirely our own fault if we do not keep quite straight."

"But *you* have kept straight," the young fellow said eagerly. "No one has dared to say a word against you. You are like the lady lion tamer—I forget her name—whom wild beasts, if they were ever so ferocious, did not dare to attack. But tell me, how long shall you remain in this dreadful place?"

"About a month; scarcely that, even."

"And *après*, I mean after that?"

"Not the deluge," the girl, with her attractive laugh, answered. "I may possibly, but the project is only in its infancy as yet, set sail for Rio."

"Good Heavens! And what for? And who has put such an idea into your head?"

"The what for is to get an engagement in Buenos Ayres as a concert singer, and the putter into my head of the idea is—but this is a secret, and unless you will

give me a solemn promise—such a promise, you know, as you would give to a *man*—I will not tell you another word about him."

This condition being, as a matter of course, at once agreed to, Ettie said promptly, and without the semblance of embarrassment,—

"The plan is Mr Vavasour's. He is starting on business with his secretary, and he knows so many people who are also going out, that I should feel anything but lonely, he says, on board; but, as I said before, it may all end in smoke. My sister Jennie knows nothing positive about it yet, and I never do anything that she objects to. By the way, you must not stay any longer now, or Jennie will scold me about your coming into this private waiting-room."

"Is there no one else you allow in

here? Not Vavasour, for instance?" asked Charlie. "Hang the fellow!" he went on bitterly, "if I had half his money—and I might be pretty well off, if I hadn't been a fool—I might make tracks for Rio, and—and—look after you on board ship, as he will do. My father allowed me eight hundred pounds a year, and my old grandfather, Mr Thornton, has been no end of kind to me."

"Mr Thornton!" repeated Ettie, catching at the name, for she was always on the *qui vive* to discover some traces of her parentage. "Do you mean the old gentleman who used to be the rector of Yeldham?"

"Exactly — but what do you know about him?" asked Charlie, who had been struck by the eager manner in which Ettie had put her query.

"Oh! nothing particular—I will tell

you another time," the girl answered hurriedly. "But *do* go now. How tiresome you are," and, as she fancied that Jennie's step was already sounding on the floor, she fairly pushed the intruder by an opposite entrance, from the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

ETTIE, BEING IN LOVE, GROWS AMBITIOUS.

"Why, Ettie, child, what is the matter with you? I never knew you to refuse a bit of welsh rabbit, when the cheese is so mild as this, before. Just try it. I went all the way to Hilbury's in Bond Street, thinking it would be a nice change for you and mother, and now you won't so much as look at it."

Ettie's thoughts, as she and Jennie had in the Fulham Road omnibus journeyed home together, had been so fully occupied by the mention of Mr Thornton's name, and by the intelligence that Charlie Alston and the old clergyman stood in such close relationship to each other, that

her lack of appetite for her supper was scarcely surprising. She had kept secret from Jennie the frequency of the young officer's visits to the Music Hall, for Miss Shellwood held severe views regarding such matters, and would, as Ettie well knew, experience many an anxious hour were she to be made aware that the very handsome young man, whom she had once had an opportunity of seeing, was the constant visitor of her sister. Her affection for the child, by whose exertions she and her suffering mother had been raised from the depths of poverty, was fully shared by the object of so much and such constant anxiety, that Ettie, in spite of the troubled condition of her mind, made an effort to partake of the delicacy which loving hands had prepared for her. But whilst she ate sparingly of the well peppered and

salted dish, she kept asking herself in what manner she could reconcile the confiding to Jennie the secret that she had obtained a clue to the mystery of her birth, with the keeping to herself the fact that it was to Mr Alston she owed the knowledge she had acquired. Her silence—for, as a rule, she was ready enough to laugh and chatter—convinced Jennie that something unusual had, either to annoy or to touch the child's feelings, occurred, so, following her accustomed plan of getting, if possible, to the right of things at once, she said,—

"What is the matter with you, Ettie? Something is up, I am sure. I hope that you have not been encouraging that young officer who was so civil to us, to talk nonsense to you? Or are you still thinking of that ridiculous plan which Mr Vavasour put into your head? By the way, dear, mother does not quite approve of

your being so intimate with that gentleman. She saw him once at Yeldham, at the time he was engaged to Miss Dorothy Fairholme, and though she thought him very handsome, she didn't like his looks. They were not married from Sir Geoffrey's place, but abroad somewhere, I believe. However, that has nothing to do with my question; what I want to know is, what is troubling you? I don't ask you, dear, just from curiosity, you know that, but because, if I knew, I might perhaps help you out of any worry you may have got into."

Ettie's really tender heart could resist Jennie's gentle pleadings no longer; so, laying down the two-pronged fork upon her only half-emptied plate, she said,—

"Dear Jennie, you are too good to me, and if I have kept things from you, it has been because you always worry

yourself so much about what you call" (with a smile) "my goings on. If you had known that Mr Alston is often at the "Coventry," and that I can't help liking him to come, you would only have tormented yourself; and now, good has come out of evil, for he has told me that old Mr Thornton is his grandfather, so that now, I hope, he will be able to find out for me who I am, and to whom I really belong."

Jennie's face had grown, during this short confession, ominously serious. The very little which she had seen of Charlie Alston had made it clear to her that he was one who, if he chose to gain a woman's heart, could hardly fail in his endeavour. She herself, unimpressionable and sober-minded though she was, had been moved to admiration by the sight of his winsome smile, and his graceful, high-bred manner. Could she wonder,

then, that Ettie, young and emotional of nature, should, as she had just naïvely declared, "like him" to visit her? Her fear was that something stronger and deeper than mere *liking* was causing the child's bright face to be shadowed by a cloud, and if this were so, alas! she told herself, for the girl's chances of resisting the temptations which would doubtless be dangled before her eyes! It was this fear which caused her to deal very tenderly with the culprit, whose eyes were moist with tears, and her red lips trembling with emotion.

"I am truly sorry, dear Ettie," she said, "for what you tell me, and I fear that Mr Alston must have become very intimate with you before he could talk about his relatives to you; and oh! Ettie, child, if you would only look around you, you could not fail, young as you are, and

ignorant of such things, to see and understand what is too often the fate of girls who listen to the flatteries and foolish words of gentlemen such as this Mr Alston, and others like him, are given to saying. Poor unfortunates! Think, dear, of what their end too often is, and be warned, oh, do be warned in time."

Jennie is so carried away by the warmth of her own feelings, that she failed to notice the angry light which her remonstrance has called up in Ettie's eyes, and she is therefore surprised to hear the girl passionately exclaim,—

"You are quite wrong, Jennie, in thinking as you do of Mr Alston. He has never said to me the—er—the—kind of words you mean. You might have heard without being shocked, or thinking that I was going to the bad, every syllable that he has ever said to me. And oh, Jennie," she went

on, suddenly relapsing into the, to her, rare mood of tearful melting, "I *do* love him. Do not scold me. I cannot help it. He is so good—so kind," and, overcome by the torrent of hitherto pent-up feelings that was rushing through her heart, she broke down utterly, and, to Jennie's alarm, sobbed hysterically.

For a few minutes, during which the latter was entirely occupied in endeavouring, by soothing words, and more than one loving caress, to check the girl's outbreak of feeling, the older woman avoided the subject which had called it forth; but when the girl grew gradually more composed, she said, very gently,—

"But, dear child, only think — ask yourself, for you are not wholly without experience—how is all this to end? Not in marriage, you cannot be so wild as to dream of that. Young officers such as

Mr Alston are never, I believe, too well off—"

"Oh, I know that. He is in debt, poor fellow, and has, he told me, been foolish and extravagant, and Mr Thornton has, he says, been very kind in helping him, and," continued the poor, over-sanguine girl, blushing hotly and hesitating, for she feared that Jennie, with her shrewd common sense, would think her foolish, "I hope—I think sometimes it may be found that I am—Well, do not laugh at me, dear—a lady, so that Mr Alston might, if he cared to do so, marry me. He speaks so nicely about his great friend Lord Sundridge wanting to get Mrs Vavasour's consent to his engagement to her daughter, and Lord Sundridge is a good man, almost a religious one, I should think, so that Charlie cannot be bad, or such a man would not be his friend."

"But, Ettie dear," said Jennie, when this flood of rather extraneous talk had subsided, "I do not understand what you mean about Mr Thornton, and what he may say as to your birth. In the first place he has, we have heard, grown childish, and has most likely forgotten all that he once knew about you; and then, dear, you mustn't mind my saying so, but the mystery, and then the payments ceasing all of a sudden, hadn't what one may call a good look. I wouldn't, if I were you, build upon anything Mr Thornton may be able to say, and, if Mr Alston is wise, he will give you the same advice. Have you said anything to him yet about your not really belonging to us, and of Mr Thornton having arranged with mother to have the care of you?"

"No, I have told him nothing yet," answered Ettie, whose vague hopes and aspirations had been effectually chilled by

Jennie's business-like statement of facts. "I was just going to when you came in, but I shall see him to-morrow, and you need not fear for me, Jennie, for I love him far too well to harm him."

And then, Ettie having kissed her *soi-disante* sister affectionately, betook herself to her own little room, and to the dangerous indulgence in solitude of "Love's young dream."

CHAPTER IX.

OVER SPILT MILK.

CHARLIE ALSTON'S curiosity was greatly excited by the tale told him by Ettie of the mystery which surrounded her birth, and he would have given much to be able, by any information in his power, to afford some pleasure to the girl he loved.

"There would be no use in asking my grandfather," he said regretfully. "The poor old fellow is off his nut, and would not understand a word that I could say to him."

"But if you were to show him this ring," said Ettie, taking from the inside of her dress, where it always hung concealed, the only proof of her identity which she

possessed. "It might recall the past to his mind," and, unfastening the clasp of the thin gold chain to which it was suspended, she placed the trinket in Charlie's hand.

It was a woman's ring, massive for its size, whilst both the single turquoise and its golden setting were the work, as his experienced eye detected, of a skilled and first-class jeweller. He longed, as he took the ring—warm from the beating heart on which it had lain—to press the senseless thing to his lips, but he forbore; not as yet had the passions of his hot and headstrong youth rendered him deaf to the sentiments of rectitude and gentlemanly honour, and to raise hopes in the mind of a trusting girl, which must, of course, only end in sorrow and disappointment, was an act which the higher and better portion of his nature, resisted as unworthy. But for

all that so it was, he certainly took pleasure in the thought that, in all probability, one at least of this beautiful girl's parents came of a higher race than did the unfortunate shirtmakers, whose miseries and privations, when they had been once graphically described to him by Ettie, he had sincerely pitied. In some occult manner, the revelation to which he had just listened, had the effect of narrowing the social gulf which, between the Music Hall singer and himself, had before existed, and he found himself almost unconsciously, addressing her in tones both more familiar, and more tender than any which he had previously ventured to make use of.

"This ring speaks volumes," he, after looking at it long and carefully, said, "and Ettie, dear girl, it proves how right I was in feeling certain that those small feet and hands of yours, and that *port de reine*—

I mean," he, noting the girl's puzzled look, explained, "that look of good breeding which you have, were not given you for nothing. I will do my very best to discover the truth. My mother may know something of this strange story. I wish that the governor and I were on better terms, so that I could run down to Ivydown; but he is in an awful rage with me just now, and it will be all my poor mother can do to pull me through."

"What a pity it is," remarked Ettie sensibly, as, in her pretty stage dress, cut square, and far "higher" than any Music Hall singer's dress had ever been worn before, she replaced the precious trinket in its hiding-place, "that young men will always be, as Jennie says, so dreadfully extravagant. Poor Jennie! I wish she knew you, Charlie, for she thinks of you now as a roaring lion, seeking whom you may devour."

"Stupid young woman! Begging your pardon, Ettie, she had much better put you on your guard against that fellow Vavasour. He *does* mean mischief, I could tell her; but he's such a smooth-tongued, plausible fellow, no wonder he takes in unsuspicious innocents like you."

"Now, Charlie," cried Ettie, firing up in defence of her older friend, "you shall not speak in that way of Mr Vavasour; he has always been good and kind to me."

"Good and kind! I like that, when he is doing his best to ruin your character by taking you abroad with him."

"Nonsense," the girl, with angry spirit, retorted. "How can my precious character be hurt when Mrs Vavasour and her daughters are going out as well?"

"Mrs Vavasour and the girls going with him!" Charlie, almost with a shout, repeated.

"What a strange story to have got about."

"And no less strange than true," retorted Ettie, who did not quite approve of the hidden interest betrayed by Charlie in the young ladies' movements. "Mr Vavasour told me himself that they were to sail for Rio in the *Princess Carmen*."

"And Sundridge knows nothing of it, poor old chap. I declare to God, it is too bad. Here is the best fellow going, kept in the dark by the girl he loves, who might have found a thousand ways of letting him know what is going on."

"It does seem hard," said Ettie compassionately. "And what can be Mrs Vavasour's reason for keeping her going so secret?"

"Oh! it's all on poor old Sun's account. They're spooney on one another, don't you know, he and Ella Vavasour, and Mrs Vavasour, who has the devil's own temper, and will always have her own way, is determined that she will keep

them apart. But I'll be even with her. Sundridge shall know all about it before I am a day older."

"And do you think," put in Ettie eagerly, "that I could do any good by talking to Mr Vavasour about Lord Sundridge? I know that he differs from his wife in regard to keeping the poor things apart, and I am sure that he wouldn't approve of this double dealing. Why, it's like a novel, where you read of letters being held back, and all sorts of means and cruel things being done. I should be so very glad, as Mr Vavasour is my friend, to do anything for them that I could. But, Charlie, you must not say unkind things of Mr Vavasour, nor call me an 'unsuspicious innocent.' It sounds the same as if you thought me, as Jem Curtis tells me now sometimes that *he* does, a 'sweet little fool.'"

"And pray," asked Charlie stiffly, "who is this gentleman who has the bad taste to tell you home truths? But I beg your pardon, perhaps he is a very particular friend, like Mr Vavasour, and it may not please you to hear him blamed."

"Well, I can't say it does exactly," replied Ettie, and there is a gleam of mischief in her splendid eyes, whilst she is looking down demurely on the small hands in her lap, which Charlie had justly pronounced to be thoroughbred, "for Jem *is* a very particular friend—not of mine *now*, so you need not look so savage. I thought I had told you all about him, how good he and his mother were to us when we were almost starving, and now that Jennie and he—but there, I don't see why you need trouble yourself about him. He is a compositor, and earns good wages, and, though he may show what you call

bad taste, for he has to work for his bread, he would never glare at me like a wild animal, as you did just now."

"Oh, I daresay," said Charlie petulantly, for he was in no mood for *badinage*, "that he is a very fine fellow indeed; but you should remember—well, dear, that I am awfully bothered just now about a thousand things, and that I have no right to complain if fifty compositors, or whatever the chaps may be called, are gone on you."

"Gone on me! Oh, what nonsense you do talk! As if I could care—I mean—oh, I am afraid that I am wickedly ungrateful, for since you—have seemed to mind about the people who talk to me, I have been disagreeable and distant to those whom I did not dislike speaking to before—even to poor Jem, who is, I hope now, Jennie's sweetheart. I must seem, I fear, what the

would call 'stuck up' and proud, and I hate myself for feeling as I do."

The tears are in Ettie's eyes as she thus accuses herself, little thinking, as she does so, how clearly her broken sentences have laid bare to her companion the cherished secret of her heart. It is evident that Charlie's companionship has rendered that of others distasteful to her, and therefore he, touched by the sense that so it is, and by her evident emotion, throws caution to the winds, and, drawing her towards him, whispers tenderly, as she makes a feeble effort to remove herself from his encircling arm,—

"My poor little darling, you must not torment yourself about nothing. I can understand so well what you must feel as to—er—common men, and that kind of thing; but for all that, I *will* not have you make an intimate friend of Vavasour, and that if only for the reason that he is

a gentleman, and does not annoy you by coarse words and jokes. And, darling, you must not speak to him about Sundridge and his daughter. He would know directly that you and I are friends—for we *are* friends, are we not, darling? — and you won't think badly of me, even if—but, by Jove, I am forgetting! Sundridge is leaving town for a few days early to-morrow, and I must try and see him to-night about this business. You are a dear little thing for being sorry for the poor old chap. He is awfully in love, and for the life of me I don't know why, for Ella Vavasour is no beauty—not the kind of girl at all, like you, whom men lose their heads about. Oh, Ettie, child, I sometimes almost wish that you were not so beautiful—and—and that I did not long for you so terribly. What *I* feel, other fellows must feel, and some day —oh, darling, before I go to-night, give me

one kiss, and tell me that you believe I love you with my whole heart, and that, if I were not a poor, miserable devil, with only the bankruptcy court before me, I would ask you to be my wife, and pass my days in trying to make you happy."

A silly, boyish speech, perhaps, but he was young, and Ettie was his first love, so, such as the effusion was, it went straight to the girl's tender heart, and the kiss he prayed for was accorded, as, with her fair head resting on her lover's shoulder, she murmured shyly,—

"Poor, dear Charlie, I am *so* sorry for you, and I only wish so very, very much that I could make you happier."

One kiss, and one only, on those fresh, tempting lips, and oh, my friends, you that have lived and loved, give him due credit for his forbearance, for it was through distrust of himself that he rushed away,

sorrowing deeply, as he drove towards his quarters, in that he had devoured his living with the venal and unworthy, and that, in consequence of his sinful folly, whilst his heart was full to the brim of love for one so pure as Ettie, his purse was, alas! worse than empty.

CHAPTER X.

CHARLIE ALSTON GIVES ADVICE.

"But are you sure that there is no mistake?" asked Lord Sundridge, in whose barrack-room he and his friend were closeted. "What can possibly be Mr Vavasour's motive for keeping every one in the dark? Ella, I can understand, has been forbidden by her mother to let me know that they are going abroad, and she is too conscientious to disobey the order; but surely it is strange that I should not have heard it spoken of—"

"Not at all strange, dear old man," responded Charlie Alston. "Since you have

chosen, of late, to shut yourself up like a hermit, it would not be easy for you to hear society talk, and, as to the news being true, you may take your davy that it is, for I heard of it from Miss Cranston, and Vavasour himself is her informant."

"And you say that Mr Vavasour intends, if he can, to take that girl out with him, in the same ship as his wife and daughters? I can't believe it! It is too monstrous! A Music Hall singer with Ella! Good Heavens! what contamination! And what sort of a father can a man be to think of such an outrage?"

"Possibly his intention is to give Miss Ella a lesson—by example—of what a true, pure girl is, and ought to be. I tell you what it is, old chap," Charlie, who had restrained with difficulty a hot explosion of wrath, added, "you are one of the best fellows living, and you and I have always

been pals, but you are behind the times, and, moreover, must not speak to me again of a person whom you have never even seen, as you have now done of Miss Cranston. She is—but we will not talk of her, for it is an insult to sweetness and purity such as hers, even to take up the cudgels in her defence."

Lord Sundridge was both too warm a friend, and too good a Christian, to take umbrage at Charlie Alston's passionate rebuke, and he hastened, the more readily for the reason that the object of his thoughtless attack was a woman, to express his regret for having uttered disrespectful words concerning her.

"I am very sorry, Charlie," he said, "that I spoke as I did, but you must make allowances. Ella shouldn't have kept me in the dark about this plan, and then I did not know—you had

never told me that you were so—er—in earnest about Miss Cranston."

"In earnest! Well, I should think I am just. I love her with my whole heart and soul, and if—but never mind about *my* love affairs now. Let us think how a meeting between you and Ella Vavasour is to be managed."

"It will be no easy matter to get Ella to see me, if her mother has absolutely forbidden our meeting," said Sundridge ruefully.

"But her father hasn't forbidden it, and he is the head of the house, you must allow; but, however that may be, I think that, with little Kitty Fellowes' help—Lady Annandale's daughter, I mean, who is a regular brick, and, as you know, is a great friend of Miss Vavasour's—the thing might (accidentally, you understand) be brought about. For my part, it is a

standing puzzle why Mrs Vavasour objects to your marrying Ella; you are an A1 match—most mothers would be trying no end to catch you—you are both spoons on one another."

"Ah," with a laugh, "nevertheless I am afraid you can't answer for Ella until this mystery about going to Rio has been cleared up."

"Well, my dear old pal, if you go into the out-and-out good sort of girls, you know, who have always been tied to their mothers' apron-strings, you must expect to have a little trouble with them. Young women of that sort look well before they leap. They are not likely to run risks, as a foolish little Music Hall singer might be ready to do, for the man they love. In a case between duty and inclination, I'd bet long odds that, with a thoroughly well brought up girl,

the poor devil of a sweetheart goes to the wall."

"Upon my word, Charlie, I—"

"All the more reason for helping him over the stile, say I. I don't deny that you are not on the safe side with that kind of girl. No fear of *their* going the wrong side of the post, you know; but cheer up, old boy, I daresay you'll find that it's only Mrs Vavasour who is to blame. I have always thought her a scheming lot, but she sha'n't have it all her own way this time, if I and little Kit can help it. The Annandales have a garden party, I remember, to-morrow, and the Vavasours are certain to be there; now, you must have been asked, of course—"

"But," interrupted Sundridge, "what would be the use of my going when Ella is forbidden to speak to me?"

"Oh, if you are such a duffer as not to be able, without being found out, to get a girl to yourself for a few minutes among the laurel bushes, I give you up."

"You quite mistake," said Sundridge, who was beginning to smart under the merciless chaff of his friend; "it is simply that I do not wish to entrap Ella into doing what she will consider wrong."

"Oh, hang that," Charlie retorted roughly. "Girls are not always averse, as perhaps you may find, to being entrapped. Take my advice, Mrs Vavasour will be off her guard; your having avoided society lately will have done that good. Go to the 'Willows,' but keep well out of sight till you see Kitty Fellowes and her friend in a walk which leads at the back of the yew hedge towards the Thames. I'll try to get them there about six," added

Charlie, as he rose from the comfortable arm-chair on which he had been lounging, "so that, unless you should be visited with any more qualms of conscience—which may Heaven forfend!—you will, I hope, at least discover what you want to know."

CHAPTER XI.

A CONSCIENTIOUS COURTSHIP.

On the following afternoon, the love of Seymour, Lord Sundridge, for his sweetheart having, it may be presumed, proved stronger than his sense of duty, found him following the advice of his *fidus Achates*, who happened to be well up in the topography of Lady Annandale's pretty (and, for the nonce, well thronged with guests) villa residence, and keeping watch in the back regions of the Dowager's extensive pleasure-grounds for the coming of the girl he loved. The place in which he had been bidden to lie *perdu* was not precisely the one in which a lover would

care to indulge in sentimental dalliance. Concealed by the tall yew hedge already mentioned from the ornamental portion of the beautifully kept walks and shrubberies, it was there that much of the rough gardening work was carried on, and Lord Sundridge, as he paced between decaying heaps of dried leaves, and still less fragrant kinds of soil improvers, or leant against the uncongenial wall of a potting shed, kept his eyes fixed between openings which he had effected in the evergreen wall of his temporary prison, and told himself—for he was a man of fastidious tastes and habits—that Charlie Alston, excellent fellow though he was, might have chosen some *sweeter*, pleasanter spot in which he (Sundridge) could pass the tedious time of waiting.

It was over at last, that bad *quart d'heure*, which he had magnified into a

dozen times its length, and Sundridge, with a satisfaction which perturbation of spirit somewhat neutralised, caught the sound of advancing footsteps, and of girlish voices, "prattling as they came." In a moment he had emerged from his place of concealment, and, with an abortive attempt to appear unconcerned, had advanced towards the two girls, with one of whom, Kitty Fellowes, to wit, he was totally unacquainted. That young person proved herself, however, to be fully equal to the occasion, for, with a laughing excuse to the greatly startled Ella for her absence, she hastened from the scene in which she had borne a small, but nevertheless no unimportant, part.

Almost before the slight figure of the girl was out of sight, Ella Vavasour's two hands were clasped in her lover's, and the simultaneous cries of,—

"Dear Sym! How glad I am," and "Darling Ella! This is happiness indeed," were softly breathed from lips which feared, full as were their hearts of love, to meet.

"Where have you been? I did not know that you were here," said Ella, as, blushing deeply under her lover's ardent gaze, she, all unconscious for the moment that she was breaking the fifth commandment, allowed her hands to remain in the grasp of the tabooed one.

"I came to see *you*, darling," was his reply, "and, excepting Charlie Alston, no one knows of my coming. You must forgive us both for this deception. It is wrong, I know, but when I heard, which I did last night, that you were going to Rio, and going, too, without your having said one word to me of this dreadful coming separation—"

"But, Sym, dear, I did write to you. In my despair at the thought of how false, but forgetful, you might think me, I did what I knew was wrong, and, without my mother's knowledge, wrote to you of the misfortune that was hanging over our heads. I felt directly afterwards how wickedly deceitful I had been, but it was for you, dear, so I have tried hard to keep the sin from mother, and to bear it patiently without confessing even to Father Glynne."

"Dearest Ella!" ejaculated Sundridge, for he was touched by this proof of the girl's affection, whilst the influence over her of Mrs Vavasour's conscience-keeper inwardly chafed and irritated him, "I ought to have trusted you more. You could not, I should have been certain, have left me of your own free will to discover what would give me so much pain. But

forgive me, darling, and do not think me over distrustful or suspicious; what—as you did write—could have become of the letter which to me would have been of such priceless value?"

"What indeed?" repeated Ella wonderingly; "I put it in the letter-box myself, and the possibility of its miscarriage never for a moment occurred to me."

Lord Sundridge was silent for a moment. He felt during that short space of time strongly tempted to weaken the influence of Mrs Vavasour and her spiritual "director," by revealing to Ella his conviction that it was to the mother whom she so implicitly trusted that the non-delivery of her letter was due. His religious proclivities were, like those of Mrs Vavasour, decidedly Anglican, but, unlike that autocratic lady, he was his own conscience-keeper, and that same conscience whispered to him the truth

that, to lessen Ella's respect for her mother would be a sin, and therefore he endeavoured to content himself by repeating his surprise at the occurrence, and his satisfaction at the discovery that *she*, at least, had not, in her *own* trouble, forgotten him.

"But, my darling," he went on to say, "let us consider, during the very few moments that we can enjoy together, how *your* departure on this horrible voyage is to be prevented."

"I cannot tell. I have thought of everything," Ella said despondingly. "Mother will not hear of leaving me behind, although Lady Annandale has been very kind, and has invited me to stay with her for months."

"She fears our meeting, I suppose, and yet I should have thought that the proofs of obedience you have already given would

have been sufficient to satisfy any reasonable demand. But, Ella dear," he continued, waxing bolder, as the colour flashed in the girl's pale cheeks, and, under the passionate longing of his eyes, the corsage of her light muslin dress rose and fell tumultuously, "have you forgotten that you are my promised wife, and that you are in debt to me for many an arrear of what I have a right to claim? You have told me that you love me, so, for once, my dear one, let your heart rather than your conscience have its way."

And then, almost before he has ceased to speak, his arms are round her, and kisses, warm and passion-stirring, are rained upon her blushing face.

Startled, bewildered (and, it is to be feared, seeing that, after all, this sinner, *malgré elle* was no ice maiden), rapturously happy, the girl forgot, during the few moments that

her head lay upon her lover's breast, not only her conscience, but her mother's severe injunctions, and even the authority of her redoubtable spiritual director—Father Glynne himself.

It was, however, impossible that this dream of bliss could long continue. Ella's nature was the reverse of a self-adjusting one, and she had been too long under the spell of her strong-minded mother's influence and teaching for reaction not to, right speedily, take place, and for her fault not to stare her in the face. No sooner was this the case than she wrenched herself from that fond embrace, and an anguished cry of self-reproach was about to escape her lips, when Sundridge, with a fond kiss, and the words,—

"Hush, darling. We may be overheard, and I have still much to say," compelled her to unwilling silence. "Listen to me,"

he continued, still holding her two small hands in his; "you are aware that your father not only does not disapprove, but is anxious for our marriage?"

"I have been told so; but," hesitating and fearful, "my father is—is different. He—"

"Is not, dear child, you mean to say, under the spiritual direction of Father Glynne? Never mind. We must for the present waive all that. What I wish you to answer me is this. Are you not, think you, equally bound, or rather more so by God's commandments, to obey him, than you are to follow, as you do solely, the injunctions of your mother? The Bible, if I'm not mistaken, calls the husband the head of the house, and in the marriage ceremony the woman swears to obey the man, so if it can be proved to you that in acting against your father's wishes

you are doing wrong, surely, darling, you will no longer make both yourself and me wretched by this blind obedience of yours to your mother and her priest?"

"But, Sym, dear—" Ella was beginning, when Sundridge broke in upon her coming expostulation by saying,—

"Tell me one thing more, my Ella. Has Mrs Vavasour ever admitted to you the real cause of her objection to me as a son-in-law? It cannot be my position, or, I may add, my, what people call, 'means,' although, for a peer, I am far from a rich man. I don't plunge—I mean I am not a gambler, nor am I—" with a pleasant smile lighting up his generally somewhat serious face—"a bad fellow, I am told, as fellows go."

Ella's pretty face reddened uncomfortably under this close questioning, whilst a sprig

of yew which she had plucked from the sheltering hedge was being rapidly, by her restless fingers, denuded of its leaves. During a few minutes she maintained a hesitating silence, and then said, in a low and agitated voice,—

"Do not ask me, dear. I could not tell you. My mother would not like me to say what her objection is. And—and—you would not care to hear it. No—no. You must forgive me, but I cannot—*cannot* tell you."

Lord Sundridge laughed.

"Well," he said, "you *have* raised my curiosity with a vengeance now, and even if I have to learn that I am accused of murder or theft, I must be told the worst; so, my darling girl, do not, for God's sake, trouble yourself about my feelings, but let me know, at once, the reason of my being boycotted."

Thus entreated, Ella, in low and faltering tones, said,—

"I believe—mother says, I mean, that it is because of Lord Ralph Dorrien."

"Of Uncle Ralph!" repeated Sundridge in amazement. "Why, what in the name of all that's wonderful can he have to do with any marriage of mine?"

"But," breathed Ella's awe-struck voice again, "mother says he shot himself."

"So he did, poor fellow! Drank himself into a fit of *delirium tremens*, and whilst unconscious of his actions, put an end to his life; but, dear Ella, I am still in the dark as to why, because Uncle Ralph had a mad passion for strong drink, *my* happiness for life is to be sacrificed?"

"Oh, don't make me say," almost sobbed poor Ella, for it went to her heart to give voice to what she feared must wound

the feelings as well as the *amour propre* of her lover; "remember that it is mother, not I, who gave the reason you ask to know."

"I understand, dear, and will save you the pain of repeating to me the truth that Mrs Vavasour's objection to me is based upon her belief that my family is hereditarily insane. I am glad — I can hardly tell you how glad I am that at last I know the truth. My plan of action is clear before me now, only, darling, you must, before we part, give me your solemn promise that, provided I can procure the consent of your father and Doctor Glynne, you will, before two months have passed, become my wife."

At that moment, the sound of approaching footsteps warned the lovers that delay might, in their case, lead to somewhat

awkward consequences, and Ella's alarm was promptly taken advantage of by Sundridge.

"Say quickly. There is not a moment to lose. Is it yes or no?"

And the girl, thus conjured, and, as it were, hard pressed, felt herself powerless to resist. Frightened, agitated, and scarcely conscious of the importance of the one little word which she was called upon so urgently to speak, she murmured almost under her breath the syllable which sealed her fate, and in another moment she found herself standing under the shelter of the yew hedge—*alone.*

CHAPTER XII.

HUGH VAVASOUR PAYS A VISIT.

"THEN it seems there is nothing for it but your going to see Jennie? You will not like it, nor more shall I, and, as for Jennie herself, why, how she will hate your going to her little work-room!"

"But why?" rejoined Vavasour, who was greatly bent on obtaining from Miss Shellwood the support of her opinion in regard to the expediency or otherwise of concealing from Mrs Vavasour the fact

that he, and no other, was the cause of Ettie's projected expedition to Buenos Ayres. "If your sister is what, from your description, I believe her to be, a sensible person, and one who would not object to a stranger becoming aware that she is— Well, not a millionaire, I can see no reason why she should be annoyed at my paying her a visit."

"Oh, there are strangers and strangers," said Ettie petulantly, "and Jennie has, like me, a horror of plots and plans. She will not be able to understand, any more than I can, why Mrs Vavasour is to be kept in the dark. But perhaps," a sudden inspiration having revealed to her a portion of the truth, "she would not approve of your frequenting so wicked a place as a Music Hall. She would not, I suppose, believe," added the girl laughing, as the

idea crossed her mind, "that you picked me up when on a slumming tour, otherwise that is a dodge which might be tried—"

Now, there were few sounds, as all who had listened to Ettie Cranston's laugh would have been ready to avouch, more infectious than the joyous burst of merriment which, whether it was introduced by the composer to enhance the charm of a comic song, or was the result of spontaneous mirth, broke from Ettie Cranston's lips. To resist joining in its chorus was simply impossible, and Vavasour being no exception to the general rule, it followed, Ettie's last suggestion having struck him as irresistibly ludicrous, that he too, anxious as he felt concerning the success of a long cherished project, found himself unable to escape the contagion, and so

began, to borrow a term much used by our forefathers in days of yore, "laughing consumedly."

This man's passion for the Music Hall singer—a passion, however, which he had hitherto succeeded in holding outwardly in check—had, with the fear before his eyes of a lengthened separation from the object of his worship, increased in intensity; and the girl's almost fixed resolve to remain in England—a change of purpose for which she refused to account—had worried him into a perfect fever of curiosity and suspicion. Ettie had never confided to him the fact that her parentage was other than it seemed, and Hugh Vavasour, being well aware of the strong hold which her mother and sister (for such he of course believed the Shellwoods to be) retained over her affections, was desirous of

obtaining their adhesion to a plan of which Ettie had hitherto very decidedly disapproved. This plan was no other than that of preventing Mrs Vavasour, when she should come on board the *Princess Carmen*, from making the discovery, not only that he and Miss Cranston were old aquaintances, but that it was under his patronage and protection that the Music Hall singer was about to seek her fortunes in the South American Republic. Without in any degree meriting the reproach of being a personally vain man, Mr Vavasour was well aware of the power which he undoubtedly possessed of producing, when he chose so to do, a favourable impression upon the minds of strangers, and the object which he now had at heart, was to, if possible, convince Ettie's natural guardians that a safer and more useful adviser and protector

for a young and inexperienced girl than Mr Vavasour could not, on the face of the earth, be found. To persuade the bedridden mother and the unsophisticated sister of the girl he loved that to conceal from Mrs Vavasour the fact of his long-standing *friendship* for Miss Cranston was to the last degree advisable, would, he thought, be no difficult matter. His wife was (as he would find it necessary to hint to his new acquaintances) a *little difficult* to live with. She was unfortunately given to the imbibing of unjust prejudices, and was apt, during the influence of those prejudices, to show herself slightly unmindful of the feelings of others. Fortunately for the success of Hugh Vavasour's plans, a circumstance had lately come to his knowledge which would, he trusted, go far to reconcile Ettie's unworld taught

relatives to the young girl's departure for the New World. This circumstance was no other than the hitherto unlooked for presence on board the *Princess Carmen* of her Captain's wife. The said wife chanced to be an Englishwoman, sensible, kindly, and of middle age, and her companionship during the voyage would, as Vavasour intended to point out (both to Miss Shellwood and to Ettie herself), render the latter independent of any necessity for Mrs Vavasour's notice or support.

Armed with these unanswerable arguments—as he considered them—in favour of his cherished scheme, Hugh Vavasour, looking, as was his wont, every inch a high-bred gentleman, betook himself to the small abode, situated in a street off the Fulham Road, in which Jennie Shellwood carried on a tolerably re-

munerative trade as a dressmaker, and a "maker up," as she took especial care to have generally known, of "ladies' own materials." The room into which he was ushered was on the ground floor, and being the one in which Jennie habitually received her clients, was well nigh empty save of pattern books, and of coloured plates representing female figures clothed in the latest fashions. During a few minutes which, by Vavasour's impatience, were magnified into hours, his only resource was gazing on the impossible shapes of simpering ladies, with waists such as a dwarf might span, and costumes which it would require a considerable amount of female hardihood to wear. From this uninteresting pastime he was roused by the entrance of Jennie, who, in a simple cotton dress, which nevertheless fitted her small, trim figure like wax, advanced, with

a somewhat old-fashioned curtsey, into the room.

She held in her hand the visiting-card which Vavasour had, on his entrance, given to the little maid-servant by whom he had been admitted, and with the words, somewhat stiffly spoken, of "Mr Vavasour, I presume?" she invited him to be seated on one of the two horse-hair covered arm-chairs, which, together with a mahogany sofa to match, formed, with the exception of the large, pattern-strewed table, the sole furniture that the room contained.

"I hope," said Vavasour with the smile upon his well-formed lips which had won for him not a few golden opinions both from the young and old of both sexes, "that my visit will not be considered an intrusion; for, as perhaps you are aware, I am authorised by your

sister to pay it. She has, I conclude, informed you that I am a friend who has always shown himself anxious for her welfare?"

"Excuse my boldness, sir," said Jennie, who had seated herself in the fellow-chair to the one occupied by her visitor, and was looking at him with cold, scrutinising eyes, which were far from encouraging to his hopes, "but in my opinion you would have been a truer friend to Ettie if you had never put it into her head to go so far as America, in order—as you may think—to better herself, but which may, seeing how young she is, and unfit to take care of herself, end in her ruin—"

"Pardon me, Miss Shellwood," rejoined Vavasour, "for saying that the word you have used is a harsh one as applied to your sister. She is a brave, high-

minded girl, and more than equal to being the guardian of her own good name than is many a woman three times her age. I have watched her for some time now, and, had I not been sure of this, I should never have taken upon myself the responsibility of suggesting the change to which, I regret to see, you appear to object."

"Our objection, sir—that is to say, my mother's and mine—have, as you know, had but little weight with Ettie. She has, we fear, made up her mind to go to Rio—"

"And, in my opinion, she has, in doing so, acted wisely; but, my dear lady, before we begin to discuss at length the merits of the question, I wish to inform you of a circumstance which I cannot but think will materially alter your views regarding your sister's voyage.

She will, during its continuance, and, I hope, also after her arrival at Buenos Ayres, enjoy the society and protection of a kind and excellent English lady. Mrs Blandehard, who is the wife of the Captain in command of the *Princess Carmen*, is going out on this trip with her husband, and she has promised to look after Miss Cranston as though your sister were her own child. As regards myself, I am, as you are probably aware, a family man."

Jennie, with no apparent relaxation of her facial muscles, bowed her assent to this implied question, saying, as she did so,—

"My sister informed us, when speaking of the voyage, that business was the cause of your undertaking it, and that your lady and her two daughters were to accompany you on this occasion."

"Exactly; with this difference only; that my eldest girl, having lately accepted an offer of marriage, will remain in England as the guest of my cousin, Lady Annandale. My youngest child, Dolly, a girl of seventeen, will be her mother's companion, and I wish I could anticipate for the poor little thing a better time than she, I fear, is likely to have, for Mrs Vavasour—well! we are none of us perfect—is, I regret to say, not always, between ourselves, easy to get on with. She hates the sea, and yet, for some reason that it is impossible to arrive at, she is determined to undertake this voyage; and then, a fact still more incomprehensible, the engagement of her daughter to Lord Sundridge, instead of affording her the pleasure which it would give to most mothers—for the match is in every way

desirable—is resented by her as though she felt it to be a private wrong done to herself."

He paused for a response, but as his hostess failed to see any cause for this sudden outburst of confidence, she remained silent, and he continued thus,—

"I am afraid, Miss Shellwood, that you disapprove of the frankness with which—to my own regret, I beg you to believe—I have spoken of my poor wife's foibles. But for my desire to render the voyage as little uncomfortable as possible to your sister, I should never have alluded to a subject which, as you may suppose, has not tended towards making my married life a happy one."

Hugh Vavasour's voice grew slightly tremulous as the last words escaped his lips. His was no simulated emotion, but

simply the result of a sensitive, excitable temperament which rendered him at times, as is indeed apt to be the case with not a few of us, liable to be wrought upon by the sound of our own self-pitying words.

After a few moments' silence, during which Jennie's feelings towards him had become decidedly softened by compassion, he spoke again.

"Miss Shellwood," he said, "we are new acquaintances, but if you will allow me to speak to you openly as to a friend, you would, I hope, understand me better, and I should run less risk, than is now the case, of having my motives misinterpreted. May I then hope that you will listen to me favourably?"

Jennie hesitated for a second or two, and then said, almost graciously,—

"I have no reason, sir, to listen to you otherwise; I prefer open speaking, and shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

CHAPTER XIII.

TOO LATE!

"WHEN," began Vavasour, "I own to you that one of the chief causes of my matrimonial failure has been jealousy on my wife's part, I trust that the admission will not prejudice the cause which I have at heart. I declare to you, on my honour as a gentleman, that I have never given the slightest excuse for the —er—susceptibilities which have proved so distressing, both to Mrs Vavasour and myself. It has not, as I hope you will believe, been my custom to frequent the

pleasure haunts to which unmarried men are justified in resorting, and my first visit to the "Coventry" was made at the suggestion of a music-loving friend, who insisted on my hearing the wonderful voice of Miss Ettie Cranston."

"Ah," sighed Jennie, "that voice of hers, although it has been the means of rescuing us from bitter poverty, has, it is to be feared, proved a dangerous gift for the poor child herself—"

"Let me beg of you to take a more cheerful view of your sister's future. I had not listened for a moment to the glorious notes which, like the carol of some brilliant bird, welled from your sister's throat, before I told myself that to waste such a wonderful gift upon the audience of a London Music Hall was a cruel sacrifice, and I resolved, my influence in Buenos Ayres being considerable, to

obtain for her (provided that she approved of the plan) an engagement, at a good salary, in that city. Since my first introduction to your sister I have ever treated her, as I am sure she must have told you, with the simple and respectful courtesy of a friend—"

"Ettie has mentioned to us," Miss Shellwood said firmly, "that you have always behaved to her as a gentleman should."

"Well, then," smiled Vavasour, "I may perhaps, under those circumstances, venture to suggest the expediency, taking into consideration the peculiarities which I have been reluctantly compelled to mention, of keeping Mrs Vavasour in ignorance of the fact that Miss Cranston is going out to Buenos Ayres at my instigation, and under my friendly guidance and protection. In my wife's eyes, Mrs Blanchard will be

your sister's sole chaperon, and she (Miss Cranston) will, by means of this harmless little *ruse*, be spared any annoyance which, if the whole truth were known, might possibly accrue to her."

"But," began Jennie, who had listened attentively to her visitor's reasonings, "crooked ways such as those are seldom found to answer, and honesty," shaking her head slowly, "is, we are told, the best policy."

"Granted, my dear madam, as a rule, but then every rule has its exceptions, and you, as a sensible, Christian woman, will, I am persuaded, see the advantage of helping, if I may so call it, the cause of peace. Your promise not to oppose any wish of your sister's to conceal the actual (though, after all, very harmless) truth from my wife would save me a vast amount of vexation and worry, whilst

for Miss Cranston, the benefit would be incalculably great. May I then hope," Vavasour, with another of his winning smiles, added, "that my cause is gained?"

Thus urged, Jennie, with as good a grace as she could assume, confessed herself vanquished, and Hugh, fortified by the promise which he had laboured so hard to obtain, went on his "crooked way" rejoicing.

. . . . . .

And now, previous to conducting the various personages connected with my story on board the *Princess Carmen*, a large and well-appointed liner, now lying in the Southampton Docks, it behoves me to devote a few pages of retrospective history to others, who in this ower true drama, have "strutted their little hours" upon the "stage of fools."

To begin, then, with Lord Sundridge,

to whom, as the only nobleman that in these pages has actually lived, and moved, and had a being, it is a conventional duty to accord precedence. He, after his all-important interview with his betrothed, lost no time in putting in practice the designs of which he had at that time given notice. Fortunately for the success of the lovers' matrimonial projects, Mrs Vavasour's spiritual director was the reverse of a bigoted Anglican priest. He had been, previous to taking holy orders, an officer in the Foot Guards, and, as a man who had seen something of the world, he could plainly perceive the advisability of lending a favourable ear to Lord Sundridge's suit. To Dr Gywnne, as well as to the rest of the world, Mrs Vavasour's real reasons for opposing the marriage were a mystery, and during the interview between himself and Sundridge,

which the latter sought and obtained, "Father" Gwynne did not hesitate to express both his sympathy with the cause of Ella Vavasour's suitor, and his intention to, if possible, remove the unfortunate prejudices which led the young lady's mother to refuse her consent to the marriage.

The alliance thus happily formed led to the most beneficial as well as speedy results. Deprived of the support of her conscience-keeper, Mrs Vavasour gave a reluctant consent to her daughter's engagement. Lady Annandale's offer of receiving her young relation for a lengthened visit was accepted, and the wedding, which was to take place from the "Willows," was, in accordance with a stipulation made by Mrs Vavasour, not to be long delayed. This proviso on the part of the hitherto opposing party was, of course,

welcomed by the lovers with unconcealed satisfaction. Previous to the return, in a few months, from Rio, of his mother-in-law elect, Lord Sundridge would, he rejoiced to think, be in possession of his bride, and freed from any annoyance which Mrs Vavasour had once possessed the power to occasion him.

Les extrêmes—says the French proverb—*se touchent*, and if there be truth in the dictum, now is the time, seeing that we have succeeded in bringing an exceptionally good young man safely into port, to give some account of the prodigal who, too late in the day to be forgiven, repented him sorely of his wrong-doings, and was passing many an uneasy hour in thinking how best he could confess to his justly-irritated father his conviction that he was "no longer worthy to be called his son."

Engrossed by thoughts such as these, and also by the vexed problem of how it was possible for him, in the extremely low state of his finances, to carry on his now lost game, Charlie Alston sat, on one bright summer morning in his luxuriously-fitted barrack-room, with a heavy cloud upon his usually *insouciant* young face. He was alone. On the costly velvet-covered, and unpaid-for armchair, which stood opposite to the couch on which, with a cigarette between his lips, he lounged, there sat no congenial chum, ready with stereotyped words of encouragement, to keep up his friend's flagging spirits, and bring what Solomon has called "the laughter of fools" to the mouth which, though finely moulded as Cupid's bow, wore, for the nonce, a saddened, and even a sunken, look.

Charlie was roused from his highly

unsatisfactory reverie by the sudden opening, and that by no well-trained servant's hand, of his room door, and in another moment Colonel Alston, looking his sternest, and least mercifully inclined, stood in the flesh before his startled son. The latter, rising from his chair, shyly offered a hand, which, not being accepted, proved at once to the culprit that his day of grace was past. For the space of a few terrible minutes the inexorable judge stood speechless, taking, as it seemed to Charlie, an austerely critical survey of the room's contents.

Unfortunately—seeing that the Colonel had always, even in his salad days, been proof against the blandishments of the fair and frail—the walls were ornamented by not a few coloured portraits of ladies, who, in light costumes and lively attitudes, were smiling sweetly

down upon the intruder into their domain.

"So," said the Colonel, pointing severely with his cane at the most *décolletée* of the nymphs in question, "it is for creatures such as these that you have reduced yourself to beggary?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," Charlie hurriedly put in, "those are all fancy portraits. I never in my life set eyes on one of them."

"And I suppose you will tell me next that you never set eyes on Colonel Grimshaw, to whom you owe some hundreds—a debt of honour, forsooth, which I, in addition to every other claim upon you, shall have to pay?"

"I am not in the habit of telling lies," Charlie was beginning hotly, when, remembering that the person he so addressed was his much-injured parent,

he began humbly to plead his well-nigh desperate cause. He had been a fool, he said—had played recklessly in the vain hope of recouping himself for his previous losses, and even now, if his father would give him another chance, he would make atonement for the past, and, by degrees, pay off the debts of all kinds which he had contracted.

During a lengthened confession, in the course of which the unhappy prodigal made not the slightest effort to excuse his misdemeanours, Colonel Alston, who had listened to it attentively, betrayed not the faintest symptom of emotion; and when the poor, sensitive lad had, after working himself up to an almost girlish state of agitation, brought his pitiful harangue to an end, he saw at once that, even as he had first anticipated, his doom was sealed.

It is needless to follow the unrelenting father—who was smarting not only under a keen sense of disappointment, but under that of having to pay considerable sums of money, which he could ill afford to part with—through the unsparing lecture which he poured forth on the sinner's head. It is sufficient to say that, so far from "a new robe" (of reform and righteousness, as might have been hoped) being "put upon him," the luckless young soldier saw himself, in imagination, stripped of the goodly trappings which he had worn so gallantly, whilst, as regarded the genial welcomings and festivities of home, it was made clearly apparent to the too late repentant prodigal, that the sooner he made tracks for distant Queensland—the country in which Colonel Alston had decided that his erring but still too-dearly loved son should, by the

sweat of his brow, endeavour to retrieve the past—the better pleased would be the author of his being, and the present relentless arbiter of his fate.

CHAPTER XIV.

DISCOVERED.

THE crisis in Charlie Alston's fate, which has just been recorded, took place about a week previous to the sailing of the *Princess Carmen* for the Port of Rio, and Ettie Cranston, after keeping Vavasour on tenter hooks in regard to her final decision, had at last announced her irrevocable purpose of becoming a passenger on board the Liner. It was with no light heart that she was leaving her native land, and her decision was, in fact, chiefly the result of her disinterested love for

the man from whom she believed herself to be for ever parting. She had spoken the simple truth when she had declared to Jennie Shellwood that she would never be the cause of injury to Charlie Alston's future, and when, setting aside selfish hopes and wishes, it had appeared clear to her that any encouragement of his attentions—attentions which, on his part, were evidently of a serious nature—would infallibly injure him, she resolved, with an amount of unselfishness and wisdom beyond her years, to put both herself and her young lover out of the way of temptation. That a marriage with her would be fatal to his prospects was a fact which she only, after mature deliberation, realised. The foolish fancy that the clearing away of the mystery which surrounded her birth might tend to narrow the social gulf that at present existed between her and

Colonel Alston's son had been but the delusion of a moment, and when, after the lapse of many days, she failed to receive, anxiously as she watched and waited for them, any tidings of the absent one, she very wisely resolved to, if possible, banish him from her mind.

Resolutions such as these are easily made, but to keep them is (as we, most of us, have had during our lives, reason to acknowledge), especially when the maker thereof is young and soft of heart, by no means so easy to keep, and Ettie, during the days when she was apparently absorbed in the preparations for her voyage, bore, unsuspected by all save Jennie, a weight as of lead within her breast. Mrs Blanchard, the Captain's middle-aged, but still good-looking wife, proved at this time a very kind and efficient friend

to the inexperienced girl. She accompanied her during her shopping expeditions, and assisted her in the choice of an outfit, some peculiarities of which caused not a little surprise to the stay-at-home London dressmaker.

"Why, Ettie, child," Jenny said, after listening to certain explanations which on one occasion the display of purchased materials invoked, "you don't mean to say that you are going to a country that's so hot you won't be able to wear anything but your smock?"

Ettie laughingly explained the true state of the case, *id est*, the necessity which existed for a certain number of light cotton garments being forthcoming amongst the more solid as well as ornamental dresses which were to compose her outfit; and having thus, on one point at least, set Miss Shellwood's mind at rest, the girl

had to undergo sundry anxious queries in regard to her own wishes and inclinations.

"I can hardly even yet bring myself to believe, my dear, that your heart's in this voyage," the older woman said. "Why, you haven't looked like yourself since it's been settled on, and if only the thought of it has changed you so, what will the going among all those strangers do, I should like to know?"

"No harm, dear old Jennie," the girl, with a bright laugh, replied; "and I enjoy the thoughts of going more than I can tell you. Of course, I am sorry to part with you and mother, and I shall come back—oh, such an important personage—a 'Queen of Song,' 'a Diva,' 'a second Patti,' perhaps," and the joyous carol, without any control

"But the sweet one of gracefulness,"

rang from a soul which apparently was as blithsome as a bird's.

But, pleasant as was the sound, Jennie's ear detected in it a ring of bitterness and the sigh which she breathed over the girl's too probable future, found, although the good soul heard it not, its echo in the breast of the loved one who had called it forth.

. . . . . .

It was on one of the loveliest last days of July that the *Princess Carmen*, with all her passengers on board, steamed down Southampton River on her way to the capital of the Argentine Republic. Miss Cranston, the beautiful friend of the Captain's wife, and the *artiste* in whose transatlantic success the rich and influential Mr Vavasour was known to take an interest, had no reason to complain of the arrangements

made for her comfort. A small private cabin, next to that occupied by Mrs Blanchard, was assigned to her use, and it was in that retreat that the poor child endured, during three miserable days, all the horrors of a complaint from which the heroines of fiction are generally supposed to be exempt. Ettie, however, proved an exception to the rule, and the sufferings that sea-sickness occasioned her left her in such a state of prostration, that it was not until the vessel arrived within sight of the Cape de Verde Islands that she had regained sufficient strength, either of body or will, to enable her to appear on deck.

During the trying days and nights of suffering, which had temporarily reduced poor Ettie to a shadow of her former self, she had been carefully tended, not only by the Captain's wife

and the ubiquitous stewardess, but by no less a person, singular as it may appear, than Mr Vavasour's daughter Dolly, or, as she was, by her familiars called, Dot. That young person, who was so fortunate as to be a "good sailor," had taken it into her small wilful head to act as sympathising friend to the beautiful professional singer, of whose acute sufferings she had been informed by Mrs Blanchard. During the intervals when she was off filial duty (for Mrs Vavasour had lost no time in taking helplessly to her berth), Dolly, for whom the *artiste* possessed a mysterious attraction, made her escape to Ettie's cabin, and endeavoured, by kindly sympathy, to soothe the sufferings of the patient.

When Mr Vavasour and his family, escorted by the Captain, made their first

appearance on the steamer's quarter-deck, Ettie was already seated there, under the awning, with Mrs Blanchard standing by her side. According to a previously-made agreement, no sign of recognition took place between Hugh Vavasour and his *protégée*, nor was it till the former *happened* to find himself, at dinner, seated by Ettie, that he ventured to pay her the few and normal attentions which, on such occasions, a gentleman is justified in offering, at a public table, to a stranger of the opposite sex. Mrs Vavasour, seated on the Captain's right hand, was too busily engaged in plying him with questions, *quoad* the probability or otherwise of a quick run to Rio, to notice either the presence of Ettie, or the conventional civilities which were offered by her husband to the girl whose extraordinary beauty had already become a subject for remark on

board the vessel. Dolly, however, who happened to be an extremely observant young person, was quick to perceive both the veiled devotion, if such it might be called, of her father's manner, and a species of consciousness on the girl's part, which was scarcely consistent with the theory that the two persons whose proceedings she was furtively watching were entirely new acquaintances. Dolly adored her father; in her sight he could do no wrong, and should the fact be as she had some faint reason for suspecting, she felt so certain that her father had good reasons for keeping his previous knowledge of the beautiful singer a secret, that she resolved, with the audacity of a favoured child, to question her parent point blank on the subject. Following out this resolve, she, when dinner was over, and Hugh Vavasour made his

way to the quarter-deck for fresh air and a cigarette, linked her arm within his, and said coaxingly, and with the audacity which is said to ensure success,—

"Father, dear, I want you to tell me something about that sweet-looking Miss Cranston, next to whom you sat at dinner, and who, I fancy, has something of a likeness to Ella."

"About Miss Cranston?" Vavasour, with well-acted surprise, repeated. "My dear child, what can you possibly mean?"

Dolly shook her small curly head mutinously.

"I mean, dear," she said, "that I feel sure it is owing to kindness and help on your part that she is going to appear in Buenos Ayres, and I want you to say whether I may know her,

and—er—make a friend of her, poor thing. She is so beautiful, and—"

"Is as good, my Dot, as she is beautiful," Vavasour broke in. "All the same, for her own sake, and for reasons which you will easily understand, I think it better that you should not become intimate with Miss Cranston. You are quite right in supposing that it is owing to my influence she has obtained a short engagement at Buenos Ayres, and also that business connected with the voyage occasioned me to have several interviews with her in London. Her family are excellent and most unworldly people, and, having promised them to look after Miss Cranston's comfort, I cannot quite treat her as a stranger; but as many estimable people, your mother included, look upon Music Hall singers as necessarily objectionable characters, it will,

as I before said, be for the poor girl's good if you refrain from in any way drawing attention upon her or her profession."

Dolly listened respectfully to this explanation, and would probably, but for Ettie's lengthened sufferings, have obeyed her father's injunctions, and refrained from any attempts to become intimate with his *protégée;* she was, however, quick-witted enough to keep from her mother's knowledge the fact that she and Ettie Cranston had become, during the tedious convalescence of the latter, almost *friends;* for Mrs Vavasour had on more than one occasion given voice to her opinion regarding the inexpediency of admitting "such persons as Miss Cranston to the same table" as herself, and had thereby—according to Dolly's view of the subject—fully justified her father in the steps he had taken

for Miss Cranston's protection from impertinence and insult.

It is the day of the casting anchor for coaling purposes at Santiago of the *Princess Carmen*, and Ettie, looking very white and weak, has been, by careful hands, placed on a folding-chair under the awning, and within a few feet of the companion ladder. She is alone, and, after her long confinement to her cabin, is enjoying a fresh breeze that blows upon her from the sea, and the view of the grand Fogo mountain which, at the height of nearly ten thousand feet above the ocean, rises its giant head. Absorbed by the contemplation of a sight as new to her as it is in itself magnificent, she fails to notice, until he is close beside her, the approach from the companion ladder of Mr Vavasour. He has not seen her since

the ravages which long continued illness have made upon her lovely face, and the sight of her pallor greatly disturbs, for the moment, his powers of self-command. With almost a rush he is by her side, whilst her small, and now almost transparent hands are clasped in his.

"My poor child," he incoherently exclaims, "how dreadfully ill you look. What have you been doing to yourself to grow so pale and thin?"

"Ask Dr Wilson," answers the low, weak voice of the invalid, "and I think he will tell you that at one time he did not expect me to live. I had horrid cramps and spasms, and I am now terribly afraid that my voice has gone, and if so, what will become of me? I should be a beggar, unable to earn a shilling! Oh, it is an awful, awful

thought! Fancy! I should not perhaps be able to pay even for my passage home," and tears, the result of physical weakness—for she possessed no lack of bodily courage—well from the eyes, which, owing to the abnormal thinness of her small face, look almost preternaturally large and bright.

Vavasour is intensely moved.

"My poor child," he says tenderly, "you must not let such foolish fears as these distress you. Why, it seems almost as though you had forgotten that I, who—er—am your friend, possess the power, as well as the will, to shelter you from every storm. If I had my way, Ettie," he with increasing vehemence, and imprudently raising his voice, added, "you should never earn, as you call it, another shilling."

"But how could I repay you?" asks the genuinely astonished girl. "I could not take your money for nothing, and, rather than be dependent upon any soul that lives, I would," sobbing hysterically, "throw myself into the sea."

The sight of her agitation puts Vavasour beyond himself.

"Child, child!" he says, as he leans with passion-stirred eyes over her drooping form, "why will you torture me so cruelly? One word from you, one note of your sweet voice, would repay me for—"

He stops suddenly, and Ettie, roused by that abrupt absence of sound from her trance of bewildered surprise, raises her eyes, and at once perceives the cause of Mr Vavasour's unexpected silence; for there, within hearing of her husband's excited tones, stands, on all

but the topmost step of the companion ladder, his justly indignant, and, judging from the expression of her face, not easy to be mollified wife.

CHAPTER XV.

CHARLIE ALSTON EXPLAINS HIS CONDUCT.

"It is a case in which words are totally thrown away. What I saw I saw, and what I heard I heard, consequently I shall represent the matter to the Captain, and request, now that this objectionable person is well enough to appear again at the public table, that I and my daughter may not be insulted by her presence there."

So spoke, during the first matrimonial colloquy which had, between the ill-

matched pair, followed on Mrs Vavasour's discovery, that not unnaturally incensed lady. She had made her intentions regarding Ettie plainly evident, but if she had expected that the culprit would meekly succumb to her attacks, and play the *rôle* of penitent sinner, she was fated to be disappointed, for Hugh answered her in this wise,—

"Well, if *you* are determined to make yourself ridiculous by dining in your own cabin, I have nothing to say; but, as to Dolly, there must be no change as regards her. A better or a purer girl than Miss Cranston does not exist—"

"And you dare, after what I saw, to say this to me? You have the face to speak of that worthless Music Hall singer to your wife, and to the mother of your innocent child? It is too much—too

shameful! But she shall not escape with impunity. She *shall* hear from me, and from all on board, my opinion of her, and when the Captain and Mrs Blanchard learn that she is my husband's mistress, they will not persist in forcing her presence upon those to whom the very sight of her is an insult."

To argue with an angry woman was an act of folly which Hugh Vavasour was too sensible a man to persist in; therefore, instead of pursuing that course, he, with the intention of warding off from Ettie the consequences of Mrs Vavasour's wrath, sought an interview with his friend the Captain.

"You will not, I hope, change Miss Cranston's place at table, Captain," he said, "even if Mrs Vavasour should request you to do so? I am sorry to hint at any difference of opinion between myself

and my wife, but as she has taken what I conceive to be an unjust prejudice against Miss Cranston, I consider it my duty to protect her from any unpleasant consequences which may possibly result therefrom."

As might have been expected, the gallant Captain of the *Princess Carmen* avowed himself willing to side with the rich and influential passenger who condescended to appeal to his chivalrous feelings in behalf of the beautiful Music Hall singer, but Vavasour's state of mind, even after he had obtained this desirable concession, was the reverse of enviable, for Ettie, who was rapidly regaining her health and strength, had, ever since the memorable period, now two days past, when her friend had lost his head, and spoken the wild words which had startled her into a knowledge of the truth, mani-

festly avoided him. To Vavasour, the loss of the pretty, trusting smiles with which she had been wont to greet him was as though a blight had fallen on his existence. For a man who, in middle age, realises for the first time the full depth and power of Love, passion becomes almost a disease, and it followed that the unhappy man who had, for months past, sunned himself in the bright eyes of beautiful Ettie Cranston, suddenly felt as though the gates of Heaven had closed against him, and a kind of dumb despair took possession of his soul. It was in vain that he endeavoured, by a careful watching of Ettie's movements, to obtain a few moments' private conversation with her; for the girl, fearful, doubtless, of another outbreak of passion which might expose her to the insulting remarks of Mrs Vavasour, always succeeded in avoiding

his longed-for *tête-à-tête.* The necessity for these precautions added not a little to the depression of spirits under which Ettie was labouring. Vavasour had been her earliest friend, and his kindness towards her had been both great and unvarying. The girl's nature was a trusting one, and not even Charlie Alston's occasional warnings against the possible evil intentions of her friend had succeeded in awakening in her mind one iota of suspicion in regard to the singleness of his purpose in thus openly championing her cause. In Hugh Vavasour's manner towards her there had ever been, although in a modified degree, apparent the species of high-bred deference with which a "gentil knight" will ever treat the weak and the defenceless into whose society he is thrown, and Ettie, who had looked up to him

as to a parent and a protector, was painfully startled when he suddenly exchanged the *rôle* he had hitherto played for the, to her, most unwelcome one of lover. The sight of Mrs Vavasour's face, white to the very lips with anger, had filled her with consternation, and to avoid coming within speaking distance of the woman who might — horrible thought ! — have imagined that she (Ettie) was not blameless in the matter, became for the distressed and unhappy girl, her constant and untiring endeavour.

It was with a view of placing as great a distance as possible between herself and the fellow-passenger whom she, not unjustly, believed to be her enemy, that the harassed girl strayed one evening, in the course of her quarter-deck walk, to within a few feet of the imaginary line

which, in the fore part of the vessel, separated the portion allotted to the first-class passengers from that on which those of an inferior order had a right to "take the air." Unmindful of the, to a certain degree, unfitness of the position she had taken up, the girl, leaning against the starboard bulwark, rested her tired head upon her hand, and surrendered herself to painful thought. The weather during the day had been intensely hot, for they were now not far from the Line, and were steaming on a tranquil sea, at the rate of fourteen knots an hour, to their appointed haven.

The night is, considering the lowness of the latitude, unusually dark, but the sea, as the vessel dashes on her fearless way, is white with phosphorescent light, and Ettie, looking down upon the dazzling wavelets, thinks upon the sweet-

heart who, without word or sign, has forsaken her, and sighs heavily for the love which she has lost.

Infinitely to her surprise, the sigh is re-echoed, and then, before she has time to express by a sudden exclamation the astonishment she feels, her lips are silenced by a fervent kiss. Indignant at the insult which, she believes, has by a stranger of low degree been offered to her, she is about to hurry from the forbidden precincts, when a well-known voice arrests her steps.

"Ettie, my darling! It is I—Charlie —Alston. Don't be frightened, dear; don't call out," he entreated, as he holds her small hands firmly pressed in his; and, thus adjured, Ettie takes heart of grace, and says tremulously,—

"Oh, Charlie dear, I thought it was your ghost! Where *did* you spring from?

And—and—you never wrote—you never told me—"

"That we should meet upon this confounded voyage; and my foolish little girl thought she was forgotten—was that it, darling, eh?" and again the reply to her lover's question is checked on Ettie's perfect lips by the proof, if any were wanting, that he stands before her in the flesh.

"But, Charlie, where have you been? And why have I not seen you before? Did you come on board at Santiago? And, even then, why is it that you have not shown yourself at meal times, and—"

"Because, my pet, I am a steerage passenger. I could not afford the price of a first-class ticket."

"Oh, you poor thing, how dreadful!"

"Not at all dreadful. I have been

near you, though, strive as I would—and you may be sure that I have tried—I have never been able, since we dropped down Southampton Water, to gain a moment's speech of my darling."

"Ever since Southampton! And have you really been on board all that time without my knowing it?"

"Really and truly yes, and it has been an awful grind. Not so bad, though, as going to Queensland, to which country my father, who is a very good old fellow in his way, but makes thundering mistakes, thought that he had consigned me. I had a terrible time of it for a few weeks, sweetheart, when I heard from the doctor, of whom I made a friend, how ill you were. Poor child!" he adds tenderly, "how you must have suffered."

"Yes, I was very bad," the girl re-

joins, as she softly rubs her smooth cheek against the flannel-covered shoulder of her lover. "I thought I should have died, and, as you had forgotten me, I did not seem to care much whether I got better or not."

"Foolish child! I wish that you had had more faith; and I am sorry now that I did not write, but I trusted to seeing you soon on board, when I would have told you that, contrary to my father's programme, I rushed home *incog.* to see my mother, and that she, who is the dearest thing to me on earth, excepting you, my pet, listened without a shade of anger to my confession of love for you, and, in return, told me many things which—but listen, darling, do you not hear? Some one is breathing near me! I must fly! *Au revoir*, my precious—one more kiss. Our penance

will soon be over now, and we shall have our reward for all the cruel weeks of separation that we have gone through."

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS VAVASOUR RECEIVES A MESSAGE.

On the morning following her interview with her lover, Ettie Cranston's glorious voice was, for the first time since her illness, heard heralding her advent to the breakfast-table. She is well nigh the last to make her appearance, but, as the bell has not yet sounded, the passengers, who are not numerous, are still standing in groups beside the well-furnished table. Mr Vavasour is conspicuous, as is also the Captain, by his momentary absence, and therefore Mrs

Vavasour found the opportunity, which she had long waited for, of giving what is vulgarly called a piece of her mind to the *ci-devant* Music Hall singer.

"I think, Miss Cranston," she said, advancing with flashing eyes and a scornful lip towards the pale, beautiful girl, whose joyous notes she had suddenly startled into silence, "that, considering you make promiscuous acquaintances amongst the steerage passengers, you would do better to exchange our society for theirs. I for one have never been in the habit of associating with persons of your description, and my daughter—"

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Dolly, who had sorrowed greatly over a command which had gone forth, to avoid Miss Cranston's society, "do not speak so to her; she is so good, and—"

"Hush! You are but a child, and I will not have you contaminated—"

But she could carry her insulting words no further, for at that moment Hugh Vavasour advanced, with his accustomed high-bred air, towards the group, and, offering his arm to Ettie, said, with respectful deference,—

"Allow me, Miss Cranston, to lead you to your place. I regret having been detained, and that you should, I fear, have in consequence been subjected to annoyance."

Ettie, pale as a tall garden lily, and having less than no appetite for the savoury meats which were pressed upon her notice, had accepted, seeing that choice in the matter she had had none, Vavasour's offered escort; but, once seated by his side, a feeling of painful consciousness rendered her incapable of

raising her eyes to his. Silent, and evidently confused, with her colour varying from delicate carnation to all but marble whiteness, her appearance and manner unfortunately tended to confirm, in the minds of the least charitable amongst the female passengers, the suspicions which Mrs Vavasour had been careful to instil into them.

Ettie's nature was a proud one. Her temper, too, was hot, and her perceptions were keen, consequently the kind of scrutiny of which she felt herself to be the object, rendered her justly indignant with the rude and unfeeling author of her discomfiture. Nor were her feelings towards her old friend altogether bereft of bitterness when she reflected that it was to his unwarrantable conduct towards her that her present distressful position was mainly owing.

"Oh!" she kept repeating to herself, "that this long day was over, and that I could be again by Charlie's side, and safe from insulting words and looks which, God knows, I have not deserved," and the girl's high spirit rose high within her as she sat, paling and blushing beneath the ill-bred stare of her fellow-passengers.

The professional *artiste* was seen no more abroad that day, nor was her rich voice heard. Like the notes of a bird that had been singing joyously on a fruit-tree branch, and at which a cruel boy had hurled a stone, the tender throat was mute and paralysed, and the pretty head drooped beneath its folded wing. Notwithstanding the heat, which was intense, she remained, till it was time for her to keep her appointment with Charlie, in her own small cabin, her only visitor being the Captain's wife, who, with the

kindly intention of pouring balm into the wounds that had been dealt her, said, as she seated her ample person on the chair by the side of the indignant girl,—

"Take my advice, my dear, and don't give the matter another thought. Married ladies, when they are getting on, will be jealous sometimes, cause or no cause, and I'm only sorry I wasn't there to stop my lady's tongue. She wouldn't have broken out like that if I'd been standing by, that's very certain."

"She was terribly rude," murmured the wearied girl, as she lay panting beneath the open port-hole, and devoutly wishing that good-natured Mrs Blanchard, whose portly presence seemed to absorb an undue proportion of the heated atmosphere, would take her departure; but her visitor had unhappily got a few more words to say.

"Rude! I should think she was indeed, but that's no reason why you should stifle yourself in this hot place, when there's the awning on deck, and the main saloon with not a soul in it, where you might be as cool as a *cow*cumber. Come, now, and I'll send you a glass of iced lemonade, and you'll forget all about this worry, and be your pretty self again."

But Ettie was not to be persuaded, either by bribes or reasonings, to leave her retreat till such time as, darkness having covered the sea, she could steal forth to meet, in the place appointed, the man she loved. It matters nothing to her now that her proceedings might be watched, and that the tongue of scandal might be again, by reason of her own imprudence, busy with her good name. The result of brutal injustice had been — and it is no uncommon

one—to render her reckless; and besides, was not her sweetheart one of those men whose eyes, unknown perhaps to their possessor, understood the art of *brûlant silenceieusement le cœur d'une femme?* In short—for what matter the words in which the old old story is told?—the girl had given her heart into his keeping. He was waiting at the trysting-place to press her to his breast, and the lovely, untaught Music Hall singer was but another instance of the truth that,

> "Who that has felt soft Passion's power,
> Or paused, or feared in such an hour."

Happily for her, Charlie Alston's sense of honour was as strong as the love which brought him on that starlit night to the side of the girl whom he adored, and who, between painful, shamefaced sobs, related to him the insults which she had at

the hands of Mrs Vavasour, received. With her fair head resting on his broad shoulder, she poured out to him the story of her wrongs, whilst he, putting a mighty constraint upon his surging passion, listened to her wail in silence. Scarcely a word of sympathy escaped his close shut lips, and the murmured curse which he fulminated against Ettie's accuser was unheard by the girl who, in her eagerness to tell her tale, and in the rapture with which her heart beat under his caresses, forgot to question him regarding the stolen visit which he had paid to his home.

On the following day, infinitely to Mrs Vavasour's surprise, a printed card bearing Charlie Alston's name was brought to her cabin. On it there were a few written words, to the effect that the writer would be much obliged if Mrs Vavasour

would grant him a private audience, and the pulses of Ettie Cranston's calumniator stood still for a moment as her eyes rested on the piece of cardboard in her hand.

"Please'm, there's a young man awaiting for an answer," said the steward, who had been the bearer of Charlie's card; and thus driven, as it were, into a corner, Mrs Vavasour wrote, with a hand which was far from possessing its accustomed steadiness, the reply that on that afternoon she would be glad to receive Mr Alston's visit in the chief saloon, at five o'clock. At that hour, she wrote, there was every probability of the saloon being empty, it being the custom of passengers generally to prefer the shelter of the awning to confinement beneath the decks. Her own cabin was, Mrs Vavasour wrote, too small

to permit of her receiving a visitor, but she would endeavour to meet his wish to have no witnesses to their interview.

This note, carefully placed in an adhesive envelope, was duly delivered to the messenger in waiting, and then the writer, feeling painfully nervous and in a strange state of mental confusion, retired to the quietude of her own berth, and prepared herself as best she might, for the coming interview.

The main saloon of the *Princess Carmen* occupied the entire after-deck of the vessel, and was fitted on both sides with curtained couches which, if needed, could be converted into sleeping berths for the use of the male portion of the passengers. At the after extremity of the saloon, the lengthened couch took a narrower as well as a slightly circular form, whilst the crimson cretonne curtain,

by which it was adorned, was evidently more for show than use. Behind that curtain was a masked door, which led to the private cabin of the Captain. The latter had, however, on this occasion given up the berth which ran alongside his own to Mr Vavasour, and that gentleman chanced, on the occasion of Mr Alston's visit to his wife, to find himself, unknown to that lady, occupied in his berth, and an unintentional auditor of the conversation between her, and her companion, which was the result of Charlie Alston's missive.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS VAVASOUR LEARNS THE TRUTH.

When first the sound of voices in the adjoining saloon broke upon Hugh Vavasour's ears, his first impulse, remembering, as he did, that his presence must be unsuspected, was to leave the place of his concealment. From following out this purpose he was, however, deterred by the almost immediate discovery that one of the voices was that of his wife, and, under the strained conditions which at present existed between himself and her, he considered himself justified in

listening to the conversation, the commencement of which he had overheard. That commencement had been as follows :—

"Oh, Mr Alston," Mrs Vavasour had said, "you *have* taken me by surprise. Where have you sprung from? There was a rumour extant that you were about to try your fortunes in Queensland—"

"Yes, that was my father's intention, but I preferred a different route. Only, as I could not afford a first-class passage, I have been forced to content myself with a second."

"Have you really? How dreadful!"

"Not at all dreadful. There are some very good fellows at the other end of the ship, and besides, although I could not speak to her, I was near the girl who had promised to be my wife, and that in itself would have been a sufficient

compensation for any annoyances which I have been called upon to endure."

As will, methinks, be easily believed, the words "second-class passenger" struck upon Vavasour's excited nerves as a terrible revelation of a hitherto unsuspected truth. It must have been, he told himself, Charlie Alston, that young profligate soldier, who, handsome —damn him!—as a Greek god, had been met by Ettie in secret, and whose interview with whom had called down upon the heroine of the *café chantant* the cruel onslaught of his wife. But—the half-maddened listener remembered—the young fellow had spoken of her as his affianced wife, and if this were in truth the case, his knowledge of her could scarcely have dated from yesterday, and a correspondence, hateful to believe possible, must have been carried on,

almost before his very eyes, between the girl in whose sweet candour and virtue he had blindly confided, and the man who now came boldly forward to claim her as his own. As thoughts such as these surged hotly within his breast, he pictured to himself the beautiful child, whose maiden innocence he had himself held in such high respect, surrendering herself to the embraces of a heartless libertine such as he believed his rival to be, and the images which his fancy summoned up wrought such madness in his brain, that, during the silence which followed on Alston's last words, he resolved, and in some sort kept his vow, to listen mutely to the revelations which might be yet in store for him.

The silence, which to Mrs Vavasour had also proved a sorely trying one,

was broken at length by her saying, in the cold, strident tones which betrayed to Hugh her bitter animosity towards the girl of whom Charlie Alston spoke,—

"And, may I ask, who is the young person that you have honoured with your choice?"

"The young person," Charlie no less curtly answered, "is Miss Henrietta Cranston, a lady who has, I imagine, the pleasure of your acquaintance, and whom I have my mother's full consent to introduce to her as my bride."

"Impossible! Mrs Alston cannot know anything of this girl's antecedents, or she would not allow her name to be mentioned in her presence. A Music Hall singer, and my husband's mistress."

"Silence!" thundered Charlie; "not another word will I hear against her." Then, with a sudden change of manner,

he added, "but for it being my duty to say to you much that must necessarily be painful, I should characterise your behaviour towards Miss Cranston with the severity which it deserves; as it is, I must content myself with simply relating to you, as I was requested by my mother to do, the substance of a conversation which lately took place between her and myself."

"Between Mrs Alston and yourself?" Mrs Vavasour was in faltering tones beginning, when Charlie stopped her by saying,—

"Yes, and I trust you will believe that it is not by my own will that I am now acting; but my mother enjoined me to recall to your memory a time when a young girl, the victim of a scoundrel and so-called nobleman, found herself in sore need of friendly aid.

The poor soul," he continued, without paying any heed to the low cry of distress that broke from his hearer's breast, "was only sixteen, and in her trouble she sought sympathy and assistance from my grandfather. With his accustomed kindness he listened to her story, and then, being powerless himself to assist her, he enlisted my dear mother in the poor girl's cause. My father was at that time with his regiment in India, a circumstance which enabled my mother to leave her home for a stay of some months in Germany. The daughter of her old friend accompanied her, and there a child was born, a little girl which, a few months later, was entrusted by my grandfather to the care of Mrs Shellwood, the wife of Sir Geoffrey Fairsholme's farm bailiff."

He paused for a few minutes in a silence which was only broken by the soft rush of waters against the vessel's side, as she ploughed her way to her destination, and by the laboured breathing of the agitated woman who had, with the terrible knowledge that she was the heroine of the piteous story, listened to the narrator's words. At last, in a voice that betrayed the deep agitation under which she was suffering, she said,—

"I cannot attempt to misunderstand you, for you must know, as well as I do myself, that I was the unfortunate victim of Lord Sundridge's wicked projects. Your mother proved herself in truth a guardian angel, standing between me and the world's scorn. She has kept, too, my secret nobly—generously—even, as I believe, from her own husband, therefore, why she

should now, after the death of the poor child, whose existence for nine years I provided for, reveal to you the wretched mystery of my life, I cannot tell."

Again there was a pause, after which Charlie, with a seriousness of manner that was in marked contrast with his normal *debonnaire* demeanour, said,—

"She has spoken because the child—your child, who you have believed to be dead—is still alive."

"Impossible!" broke in Mrs Vavasour, "Mr Thornton made every inquiry concerning it, but the Shellwoods could not be traced in London, and he arrived at the conclusion that, poor as they were known to be, they would—had the child lived—have made known their whereabouts."

"To that I can answer nothing," re-

joined Charlie, "but facts are, as you know, stubborn things, and as the proofs of Ettie Cranston's birth are— "

"Ettie Cranston! God in Heaven! You do not mean to say that—but hark, did not you hear a noise? A groan, it sounded like, on the other side of that partition? Oh, Mr Alston, some one may—imagine how dreadful!—have been listening to our conversation."

"You alarm yourself causelessly," said Charlie coldly, for the unfeeling egotism of a mother, who could at such a moment think only of her own safety, filled him with disgust unspeakable. "There is no door, and the scantlings in these ocean liners are very solid. Your reputation runs no risks whatever, whilst of your daughter's I am at present the guardian, and will take good care that it does not suffer."

After this short speech, which was delivered with a dignity that became his bright young beauty well, Charlie was rising from his seat, when Mrs Vavasour's voice, in tones of entreaty, arrested his departure.

"Your news has indeed taken me by surprise," she said, "and you cannot wonder that—supposing it to be true—I see a whole sea of difficulties rising up around me. In the first place, may I ask you what proofs there are of the child's existence?"

"Those, in the first place afforded by Mrs Shellwood, who, before coming on board, I interviewed. She and her daughter produced satisfactory evidence of the child's existence, and assured me that they had endeavoured, but in vain, to obtain from my grandfather some small assistance, at a period of extreme

distress, for the child they had adopted. In addition, Miss Shellwood described to me a gold ring, one which had apparently belonged to a gentleman, as it was of massive, deep-hued gold, and contained one large turquoise. That ring had, Miss Shellwood said, been left by Mr Thornton with her mother when he brought the infant to their village. The mother, he told them, was not aware of the ring having been made use of by him for the purpose of future identification, but I," continued Charlie, "have seen the trinket, and it exactly answers the description given of it by Miss Shellwood."

"And," asked Mrs Vavasour, with unwonted humility, "may I inquire whether the — er — child, has been informed of this strange change in her condition?"

"She has not," answered Charlie. "I have thought it right that you, as her mother, should choose the time when the necessary revelation should be made."

"And she is to be, you say, your wife? But how and upon what will you live? Will she continue to be a public singer?"

"God forbid; and unhappily I must, for a time, at least, be dependent for my daily bread upon my wife. It is a nuisance, but it can't be helped, for the late Lord Sundridge bequeathed, it appears, the sum of £8000 to Henrietta Shellwood, and as the said Henrietta could not be unearthed, the money went on accumulating for her benefit. It has by this time nearly doubled itself, so that Ettie, besides being, as you must allow, a beauty, and having, in addition to her own perfect sweetness, one of the most glorious voices that ever was given

to mortal throat, is, in her small way, an heiress."

"You are fortunate," rejoined Mrs Vavasour coldly, "and being so, I can ask the favour of being permitted a reprieve until after our arrival at Buenos Ayres. There is Mr Vavasour to be considered."

"True, poor man. He has acted a father's part towards Ettie, and, as far as I am concerned, and I think I can answer for her discretion, he shall never learn the true story of the past."

"I thank you, and if, as you imagine, the promise includes Lord Sundridge and my daughters, I have reason to be grateful; and now, as this scene has proved rather a trying one, I will, if you will permit me, seek rest in my own cabin."

To this proposition Charlie Alston bowed a silent assent, and in another moment

the main saloon of the *Princess Carmen* was left to the stillness only broken by the plash of the waves against the vessel's sides, which, previous to the eventful interview just recorded, had struck upon the listener's ear.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISCOURSETH OF MANY THINGS.

Such a discovery as that just made by Hugh Vavasour was one which surely no man (however much the wife of his bosom had become, through her own faults chiefly, an object of worse than indifference to him) could well hear unmoved, and thence it followed that Hugh Vavasour, after listening to the painful truths which it had become Charlie Alston's duty to divulge, was suddenly conscious of a great and almost irrepressible weariness of life. In early manhood, when the seeds

of passion are sown in the heart, it is far from impossible to uproot them, but in later life, when the said seeds have fallen upon ground of which the soil is deeper, to wrench the roots away must often be an almost hopeless task. Hugh Vavasour's love for Ettie Cranston had been no boyish infatuation, and, strange as the fact may appear, the discovery of his wife's antenuptial infidelity only affected him inasmuch as it effectually precluded any visionary hopes of eventually possessing Ettie's love, which had hitherto supported his flagging spirits. On what foundation those hopes had been built it would be hard to say. It could scarcely have been on the death of his bosom's legal partner, for Mrs Vavasour was only by a year his junior, and was blest with a constitution far stronger than his own. Equally impro-

bable also was it that his wife would, in consequence of any lengthened desertion on his part, be driven to divorce him, but, to do Hugh Vavasour justice, he never reasoned on these possibilities; his had been but a vague belief in the *imprévu*, and now, when by the accidental overhearing on his part, that the girl he idolised was the illegitimate daughter of his wife, an insurmountable barrier had, he felt, been suddenly raised between him and her, and the existence, of which the pursuit of Ettie had constituted the chief charm, had ceased to have any value in his sight.

But the crowning cause of the wretched man's despair, was his jealousy of the man to whom he had now learned that Ettie's love was given, and when he mentally contrasted the youth and wondrous personal advantages possessed

by Charlie Alston with his own more than four decades of life: the hair, in which silver threads were beginning to mingle, and the lines of care which had gathered round his lips, he told himself that the hopes and glory of life were, for him, at an end for ever.

When this important event took place, the *Princess Carmen* was within five hours' steam of Rio. The passage had been an exceptionably favourable one, and the two hundred miles of ocean and river, which still lay between the liner and her destination, could scarcely occupy more than twenty-four hours. It was almost the last night of Captain Blanchard's stay on board his well-appointed ship, and the worthy skipper turned in for an hour or two, and slept the half-wakeful sleep of a man who, having the care of human lives, is fully con-

scious of the responsibility which he had undertaken.

Meanwhile, one of the most important of his passengers was silently pacing to and fro the deck whilst endeavouring, albeit for some time in vain, to decide upon his future plans. To live any longer under the same roof as his wife he felt to be beyond his power. He could, as I before hinted, have condoned the early lapse from virtue of the girl whom he had, later on, in his blissful ignorance, wooed for his bride, and won; but the cold-blooded selfishness and barbarous insolence with which she had treated an unoffending girl were beyond his power to forgive. No! To part from her was, he told himself, a matter of necessity; but then, in a rush of paternal love, came thoughts of his little Dot, the child of fourteen,

whose training for good could not safely be trusted to her mother, and his love for whom appeared, just then, to the stricken man, the only thing that God had left to him. He had made up his mind to fix his own abode for a time, at least, at Buenos Ayres, but the Argentine Republic was not the country in which he deemed it advisable that a young English girl should pass her early girlhood, and the father, having her interests at heart, saw, looming gloomily before his mind's eye, an almost necessary separation from his best-loved child.

. . . . . .

"But must I see her, Charlie? Oh, darling, if you can, save me from such a misery as that. She cannot be my mother! She hated me from the first moment that she saw me—and why? I

had never injured her. No, Charlie, I will not—cannot call her mother. My real mother is the one who cared for me in my helpless childhood, not the one who abandoned me in my infancy to a stranger's care."

Charlie Alston and his betrothed are seated side by side in one of the "best inn's best rooms" which in the city of Buenos Ayres is to be found. He has just imparted to her the story of her birth and parentage, and Ettie, who has listened with breathless interest to the narration, has not realised without elation the truth, that both on her father's and her mother's side the blood in her veins is *blue*. But, as the opening words of this chapter demonstrate, her heart in no way warms towards the newly-discovered parent, whilst, Music Hall singer albeit

she has been, the innate modesty of her nature shrank painfully from the contemplation of her mother's fault, which Charlie's narrative had perforce revealed. He—poor fellow—who had been commissioned by Mrs Vavasour to make known to Ettie her desire for an interview was puzzled how to act, and he was moreover possessed by an uneasy feeling that it was his duty to, if possible, draw a softening veil over the early errors of Hugh Vavasour's wife. Ettie should not, if it were in his power to prevent it, entertain uncharitable feelings towards the author of her being, and it was in the furtherance of this object that he said,—

"But, my child, you must not imagine that anything short of necessity compelled poor Miss Fairholme to part with her child. She—"

"Oh, it is all too dreadful to think

of! A girl, you say, of only sixteen! To be so young, and yet so wicked!"

"She was not wicked, poor young creature," began Charlie, who, in the face of this severe young moralist, was puzzled how to act and speak. "She believed herself possibly to be Lord Sundridge's wife, and was foolish, doubtless, maybe a flirt, and at the commencement, unconscious of her danger, played with the fire from which there was at last, but one means—if her reputation were to be saved—of escape."

"And Lord Sundridge," said the girl, after a pause; "can you find excuses too for him? Was *he* not wicked when he abandoned his own child to strangers? Oh, they are both dreadful, and I will not—no! I will not, Charlie—look upon that cruel woman's face. My only mother is poor old Mrs Shellwood, who

never in my life said to me an unkind word, and not the woman in her velvets and her jewels, who, for no reason but her own cruel temper, insulted, and called me evil names."

In the face of such obstinate resolves as this, what could Charlie say? Ettie had either forgotten, or had never fully realised the fact, that Hugh Vavasour's own overwarm words and looks had, in the first instance, stirred his wife's wrath against the object of his devotion, and the gratitude which she (Ettie) still entertained towards her earliest benefactor was a feeling which, albeit he was far from sharing, Charlie held in too much respect to tamper with, or lessen. In this extremity he was meditating a remonstrance when a letter, brought in by an hotel waiter, was handed to him on a salver. It proved to be from

Mrs Vavasour, and contained these words :—

"Dear Mr Alston,—On mature reflection, I have decided that a meeting between Henrietta and myself had better, for the present, at least, be avoided. My nerves are thoroughly unstrung, so I must leave it to you to offer my congratulations on her approaching marriage, and begging you to accept the same,—I remain, yours faithfully,

"Dorothea Vavasour."

This decision, a wise one on the writer's part, seeing that to give rise to any suspicion of the real facts of the case was decidedly unadvisable, was received by Ettie with a pretty clapping of her slender hands which sufficiently evidenced her satisfaction.

"Oh, wise and most tender parent!" she exclaimed. "You must write to her, dear Charlie, and say how cordially I agree with her in opinion, and how faithfully I will keep my promise never to reveal to mortal man or woman that she and I are kith and kin."

"Naughty child!" ejaculated her greatly relieved lover, who forthwith commenced to expatiate on the necessity—taking into consideration the unprotected condition of the bride-elect—for an early marriage.

"But, dear Charlie, what will your father say when he is told who I am? I am not afraid of your mother, but Colonel Alston, who must be so cold and hard; what will he think when he learns that I—er—am a poor nameless girl, who—"

"Child, I will not let you talk of yourself in this way," rejoined her sweet-

heart, as he pressed tenderest kisses on the little hands that were clasped, as though pleading her own cause, upon her lap. "What right has he to look for more than the perfection which my sweet love will bring with her to our home? My father worships beauty, and if you will sing to, and ride with him, he will forget that his old neighbour Lord Sundridge was a scoundrel, and your mother the victim of his wiles. The sight of my Ettie's perfect face will more than reconcile him to the wrong-doings of the past."

. . . . . .

Four years of happy married life had passed for Ettie before Mrs Vavasour again set eyes on the daughter from the sight of whose sweet face her own guilty conscience had caused her to shrink. During those years, Hugh Vavasour's

parted from wife had, through a lengthened nervous prostration, been compelled to abstain from seeking relief for her sufferings in the society of which Dolly, under the chaperonage of Lady Sundridge, freely—after she had attained her eighteenth year — partook. Meanwhile Ettie and her husband spent (to the regret of Colonel Alston, who doated on his daughter-in-law) much of their time abroad, for Charlie, whose talent for languages was considerable, had been enabled, by the exertion of high interest in his behalf, to join the diplomatic service, and, thanks partly to the charm and beauty of his wife, his career had hitherto been singularly successful.

At the expiration of four years of discontentedly endured retirement from the world, Mrs Vavasour's renovated health permitted her to again enjoy

in moderation the pleasures of the London Season.

One of her first visits was to the opera, where, from the stall in which she was seated, she could obtain a view of the stage box near to her. It was occupied by a lady and two gentlemen, the former being, as even Mrs Vavasour's defective sight enabled her to perceive, eminently beautiful.

"Who are those people in the stage box?" she asked of Dolly, who, absorbed in the interest of the "Sonambula," had not as yet had her attention diverted from the *mise-en-scène.*

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed joyfully, "that is Lady Alston, my own dear Ettie, as she *will* make me call her, for she has never forgotten the storm on board the *Princess Carmen* when I did my best to comfort her."

"And that girl had been a Music Hall singer," Mrs Vavasour repeated bitterly to herself, as she continued to gaze, like one fascinated, on the box in front of which, Ettie, with diamonds sparkling on her breast, was seated.

"And," continued Dolly gaily, "they say that he is more devoted to her than ever. People thought that he would not be, because he is so handsome, and, it was said, so *volage*, but they are all wrong, for he idolises her, and she, dear thing, is handsomer, if possible, than ever."

Yes — it was quite true that the Music Hall singer of days gone by had either learnt, or the knowledge with her was intuitive, that Henri de Balzac was mistaken when he wrote that *n'est pas courtisane qui vent.* She had early

in her married life fathomed the idiosyncrasy of the man to whom she had linked her fate, and believing that for him

> "Variety *would* be the very spice of life
> That gives it all its flavour,"

she had determined to avoid, if possible, the rocks and shoals on which the happiness of so many wives suffer shipwreck, and to study how best she could retain the love which was to her as the very breath of Life. Whilst pondering on this vexed problem, she suddenly recollected some lines which, in her early girlhood, she had read, and, as they seemed appropriate to her case, she acted on the advice—which was as follows—that they gave:—

"If thou lovest, hide thy love from him whom thou dost worship. Never let him know how dear he is, or else

thou wilt, when caught and caged, be left to pine neglected, and perish in forgetfulness."

It was dreary philosophy; but wise as it was dreary, and as Ettie's quick instincts had warned her that men, as a rule, only value the unattainable, she registered a vow, which, like the "proud young porter" in Lord Bateman's *Loving Ballad*, she "kept strong" to bear in mind the old world proverb that "Familiarity breeds contempt;" and also, when tempted to relax the rules of conduct which she had lain down for herself, she would call to mind Shakespeare's description of the Serpent of old Nile, namely, that—

> "Age could not wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite *variety:* other women cloy
> The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
> Where most she satisfies."

And thus it fell about that, as

Dolly Vavasour declared, Charlie Alston, after five years of married life, idolised still the brilliant beauty whose love, when she was "only a Music Hall singer," he had deemed it worth his while to win.

By her purity and truth she had gained him for her own, but, like the "bright . spirit" which Shelley's genius has immortalised, she succeeded by gifts peculiarly her own, to keep "Love's sad satiety a stranger to her husband's home and heart."

END OF VOL. I.

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